LOUIS BERETTI

Donald Henderson Clarke

Louis Beretti

ALSO BY

DONALD HENDERSON CLARKE

LOUIS BERETTI

IMPATIENT VIRGIN

YOUNG AND HEALTHY

THE CHASTITY OF GLORIA BOYD

JOHN BARTEL, JR.

ALABAM'

LADY ANN

KELLY

REGARDS TO BROADWAY

TAWNY

CONFIDENTIAL

THAT MRS. RENNEY

THE HOUSEKEEPER'S DAUGHTER

MILLIE'S DAUGHTER

MURDERER'S HOLIDAY

A LADY NAMED LOU

IN THE REIGN OF ROTHSTEIN

In Collaboration

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

FRANK TARBEAUX

Louis Beretti

A NOVEL

BY

DONALD HENDERSON
CLARKE

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To
GLADYS

Every author should have a
Gladys to keep his mind
off his work

"I was what it was the most regular thing to be where I was born and grew up. And it was a tough spot. I'd probably been a Boy Scout if I'd been born in a Boy Scout neighborhood."

Louis Beretti

CHAPTER I

As soon as Charlie Mock Duck saw Sam Lee he pointed a thirty-two calibre bulldog revolver at him, shut his eyes tight, and pulled the trigger as fast as he could.

Sam immediately went into action with a hammerless, nickel plated contraption, and with an agitated forefinger squirted five .38 calibre soft nose bullets at where he hoped Charlie would be.

In a moment a half-dozen revolvers were popping, women were screaming, and men were shouting. Within a half-minute Mott street was deserted except for two inert human figures. One was old Tom Wing, laundryman of Newark, who with no interest at all in social discords between the tongs, had come to Chinatown to play fan-tan. Now he was dead, and the little roll of bills which he had been carrying in his hat, New York-Chinese fashion, lay exposed on the sidewalk beside him. The other figure was that of a woman, whose obesity was heightened by obvious indications of imminent motherhood.

Two young chaps collided head on in a sudden rush for Tom Wing's money. Quick heavy blows followed. An older man stepped from a doorway, picked up the bills and vanished.

Police whistles were piercing the night. Two uniformed patrolmen night sticks swinging and revolvers and shields shining ran up with heavy feet. The two young chaps were just

ducking into an alley when one of the policemen took a pot shot at them. The official bullet smashed a window on the second floor of one of the tenements and ruined the cage in which Lucky Mary kept Pete, the canary. This set Pete at liberty. So, Hop, her pet cat, ate him.

"God damn those lousy Mules," said Mary, and began to howl. Joe Piani, her pimp, hit her a thwack in the jaw. That relieved Joe's strained nerves, so he continued to thump her, and she continued to howl.

A patrol wagon with more policemen, and an ambulance from Bellevue Hospital arrived. Mott street echoed with clanging bells, heavy heels, and hoarse police voices.

"The Chink's dead, Doc," said a Police Sergeant to the young interne who had come with the ambulance. "But I think this dame over here is going to have a baby unless you can do something to stop her."

The interne, who told newspaper reporters a few minutes later the full name by which he had been christened, and a graphic story about a delicate operation under great difficulties, got to the woman just in time to grab a fat, red mite of humanity as it popped into the world.

A moment later the fat, red mite was bellowing with a powerful pair of lungs.

"It's a boy," the interne said.

And that's how Louis Beretti was born.

Mrs. Beretti had been hit in the foot by a .32 calibre bullet, which, coughed out of a cheap revolver by an old and feeble charge of powder, was found just under the skin a few minutes after she was helped upstairs by four big policemen. Two piano movers might have done the job just as well.

Her husband, who weighed about one hundred and ten, said: "Why couldn't you wait till you got home?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Beretti said. "I was just struck all of

a heap—and all those policemen, and that little boy in the white pants, I was never so ashamed in my life."

She had breakfast ready at 5:30 next morning, and Pa Beretti drank his coffee, and ate his hot buttered toast with his usual good appetite whetted by a shower bath of two ounces of whiskey for his palate. Then he went out to look after his fruit stand.

To get there he first walked down four flights of rickety, worn, wooden stairs, inhabited by smells: a little of garlic, a little of chop suey, and quite a deal of hot grease.

In the hallway on the ground floor he stepped carefully and mechanically from long habit over the recumbent forms of various masculine figures. They were unconscious victims of a shock house next door in which a drink of what passed for whiskey was sold for five cents.

Louis Beretti's earliest recollection was of sneaking down those same stairs with his friends, Little Italy, who was older and taller, and Big Italy, who was younger and shorter, in the early hours of the morning and feeling in the sleepers' shoes. Sometimes they found some silver. Once, Little Italy found fourteen dollars in bills.

It wasn't long after this historic occasion that Little Italy was killed.

The three boys were flying kites on the roofs of the tenements. Little Italy kept right on running after he reached the edge, and Big Italy and Louis ran to the street in time to see a policeman holding back a hysterical mother.

Louis and Big Italy watched the scene with tragically unemotional expressions. Louis's eyes were dark brown, and rather round, and very direct and boring; and Big Italy's eyes were a peculiar shade of light brown, and almost insulting

in their open lidded stare. Their two grimy little hands unconsciously clasped together as they looked at the big policeman restraining Ma Italy as gently as was possible.

Neither Louis nor Big Italy comprehended then what had happened inside them. They knew that Little Italy, who had been a heap of fun, suddenly had left them for good, and all that remained of him was a small, twisted body in nondescript clothes. And they felt strangely empty, but close together.

Whenever in the years that followed Louis called on Big Italy, or Big Italy called on Louis for help each felt that strange empty feeling accompanied by a sense of warmth of companionship in a tight place.

First there were three of them and then there were only two. But for Big Italy and Louis there always were three, only Little Italy never grew up. It formed a mysterious bond between them.

Louis and Big Italy went to school on the same day. Washed and polished for the occasion, and dressed in their Sunday clothes, they were led to the mysterious torture of compulsory education by their mothers, also arrayed for the occasion.

School was a hostile institution always. Policemen and teachers were in the same category, so far as they were concerned. Outwit either, and you were a wise guy. They were both wise guys before many days had elapsed.

Red McLaurin, who lived around the corner, was one of the first friends they made. Red was Irish and romantic, and when they were in the sixth grade, he fell in love with Elizabeth McInty, a lady for whom any lad, young or old, might have been pardoned for forming an attachment. When he was late for school one morning, Red was mightily embarrassed.

"What excuse have you for being late, Patrick?" Miss McInty asked kindly.

"Please ma'am," said Red, "my mama has got a new papa,

and they stayed in bed late this morning, and so I was late for school."

During the noon recess Red stole an apple from a pushcart, and left it on his teacher's desk. He lingered after the other boys had left that same afternoon.

"What is it, Patrick?" Miss McInty asked. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I seen that driver for the express company get robbed of a thousand dollars last Monday," he said. "I was standing in the doorway when the guy came by me with a gun. And he said, 'Don't rat now kid,' and I said, 'Naw,' and he hit the driver over the head wit' his gat, and took the dough. Lots of people saw it too, but they wouldn't say anything to the cops either. I ain't a snitch."

Miss McInty long since had realized that it was useless to argue against the Code, of which this mite was a part by birth and by environment, but she went ahead and did her duty as a Christian and a citizen by pointing out the error of his ways, and his duty as a member of society.

"Huh," said Red, encouraged by Miss McInty's interest in him, and absolutely trustful in her also to adhere to his, and not to her Code, "that ain't anything. You know that convict that escaped, and they offered a $500 reward for him? Well, he's hiding in a cellar down near where I live, and I've got the job of takin' him his grub."

"Isn't he afraid you might tell the police or someone about him?" the teacher asked.

"Gee!" Red replied scornfully. "What do you think I want to do—get myself bumped off? I wouldn't tell nobody nothin'. A guy has got to keep his nose clean."

When Red came out of school, Big Italy and Louis were awaiting him.

"What was you talkin' to the teacher about, Red?" asked Big Italy.

"Nothin'," said Red. "Why?"

"Nothin' about the guy in the cellar?" asked Big Italy, light brown eyes of him and dark brown eyes of Louis Beretti boring into Red's blue ones.

"O' course not," replied Red sturdily, conscious of a strange sinking at the pit of his stomach. It was Big Italy and Louis who were feeding the guy in the cellar. And he hadn't kept his nose clean after all. A guy wasn't supposed to tell a skirt anything. "Why?" he asked.

"I thought I heard you say something," said Big Italy coldly, and with a prematurely quiet menace that might have awed an adult let alone a lad of eleven. "An' if you had——."

"Aw, Italy," Louis interrupted, "Red wouldn't be telling a skirt anything, even if he was stuck on her."

Big Italy continued to look at Red out of impassive, curiously light brown eyes, as hard and as immobile as two burnished stones, until Louis took him by the arm, and the three of them went up the street.

That night they were friendly enough and had a very pleasant time. They filled their mouths with kerosene, walked in front of a Mule and blew the kerosene at him across a lighted match.

The Mule, as Mules seldom failed to do, screamed, and ran from the fiery breath of the boys, his hat, as Mules' hats usually did, falling to the street. Now Mules always carried their money in their hats when they came from their laundries in Jersey to try their luck at fan-tan in Chinatown, and this particular Mule had thirty dollars in his hat. Sometimes there was less; sometimes there was none at all. But always there was a pleasing thrill in this game. Once they got a hundred dollars.

After they grew tired of breathing fire at Mules they fol-

lowed Big Italy two or three blocks north to a toy shop, climbed a picket fence, broke the window, and stole three pairs of roller skates. They robbed a toy shop every few nights merely as a matter of routine. It gave them a pleasant feeling of accomplishment.

From the time they were about eight years old Big Italy and Louis had kept pigeons on the roof. They never had much trouble getting the money for the pigeons. The Mules furnished it.

When Louis Beretti was fifteen he was not very tall, but he was more than ordinarily broad. He did a great deal of boxing at the club, where Big Italy, who had turned out to be not more than five feet five inches tall, and not so imposing looking either, except for his unusual eyes, already was recognized as the strongest spirit among the younger fry. Big Italy never had done any fighting yet; Louis Beretti always had done it for him. One sure sock from one of those big paws of Louis, and the boy that was socked went sweetly to sleep.

Louis was up on the roof late one June afternoon with his pigeons. It was one of those lazy, warm, sensuous afternoons, when the air up there four stories above the narrow street was as balmy as it ever was on a white strand fringed with palms leaning to the gentle pressure of the Trade winds. It was a great day and Louis felt great.

He heard a rustle and looked up. It was only Boston Sally Yee, Lum Yee's white woman, who was blonde and not so old, and who might have been most remarkably pretty if she hadn't shown signs of wear and tear. Louis said "Hello," and turned back to his pigeons.

Sally looked down at the bent head of the boy, covered with thick, blue black hair. His cheeks were red with young blood, and barely shadowed with a virgin beard. His shoulders were unusually wide over his deep chest, white yet like a girl's,

against the line of sunburn on his neck. The pigeon he was holding looked small and white in his big hands.

Sally tossed away her partly smoked cigarette, and kneeled down beside Louis. As she bowed her shoulders it became at once apparent that her kimono was her sole garment. Her breasts looked white and prettily girlish. She leaned gently against Louis, and a strand of her hair was wafted gently against his nose.

Louis felt funny. He pushed the hair away from his nose because it tickled. He wanted to push Sally away too. He was embarrassed. Sex wasn't any secret to him. It was just something he hadn't gotten around to as yet, except conversationally. He'd lived a pretty active, objective life, chasing Mules, stealing first from toy stores and later from hardware stores, and boxing and wrestling at the club. But he certainly felt funny.

"Gwan, or I'll sock you," said Louis.

"I like you, Louis; give me a kiss," said Sally.

"Gwan back to the Mule you're livin' with," said Louis.

They kissed.

Sally pulled the boy's head down into her bosom. The kimono miraculously had no fastenings at all.

"Kiss me," said Sally.

She may have looked a trifle hard to a cold eye, but her skin was warm and soft, and she was an accomplished wanton. Sally got a great, gusty ecstasy from the unpractised roughness of the lad's first passionate essay. She felt as free as the pigeons about it, and called it love.

Louis always looked at the relations between the sexes in a broad-minded way himself. The scene with Sally remained one of his sweetest recollections despite the fact that it led to a more or less minor tragedy.

For Sally raised her head and saw Lum Yee, looking angry

enough. He had a revolver in his right hand, and he was pointing it at the boy.

Whether he would have shot either Louis Beretti or Sally, or both of them, is a mystery that never will be solved, because while he was still pointing the revolver Big Italy stepped from behind a chimney pot.

In each of Big Italy's hands was an army revolver, and as he appeared from behind the chimney pot and advanced towards Lum Yee, both his index fingers were pulling the triggers as fast as they could. Coroner O'Flaherty found out afterward that five bullets had hit Lum Yee, from a pistol in the hands of a person or persons unknown.

As a killing job it wasn't much, but it was Big Italy's first, and he always afterwards followed the same technique in all his killings. He always had a gun in either hand, and he always said as he began to shoot:

"Here's luck, you bastard."

Those were the last words that ever impinged on Lum Yee's ear drums. And those were destined to be the unromantic last words which spelled funerals for many individuals whose continued existence Big Italy figured would be more or less annoying to him or his friends.

The four story brick tenements which face on Mott street are a barrier in front of another file of tenements in the rear. Passageways from the street lead through arches to courtyards of the inner row of forlorn and mysterious dwellings.

Roofs of the tenements are playgrounds for the children and recreation spots for their elders. In summer families sleep up there in groups. The roof of one tenement may be slightly higher or lower than the adjoining one, but progress from roof to roof is easy. Skylights make approach to, or descent from, the roofs a simple matter. Pigeon cotes, chimney pots and dry-

ing clothes render it no task at all for any one familiar with the lay of the land to keep out of sight.

The bark of Big Italy's revolvers scarcely had ceased when the roof was deserted of life except for the wildly fluttering pigeons. Whatever had been Lum Yee was gone. All that was left was the lead-riddled cocoon.

CHAPTER II

THOSE were the days when Chuck Connors, in his box coat with the big pearl buttons, plug derby hat, big nose, tremendous chew of tobacco, and big white bulldog on a big chain, was a figure of the old Bowery, into which Mott street empties.

Tic-Tac Chum also was a part of Chuck's equipment. Tic-Tac's mother was one-half nigger and one-half Chink, and his father was all Chink. Tic-Tac was a lobby-gow. When Lucky Mary, or Sally, or Sadie, or Fannie, or any of the other girls was hungry, she called to Tic-Tac:

"Go over to Number Ten and get me a coupla ham-and-eggs."

And Tic-Tac went and got the sandwiches, or cigarettes, or bottled beer, or whatever was required. That is, he ran errands for the girls, which made him a lobby-gow in the original meaning of the word. There were girls in both the front and rear houses in Mott street in those days. Now, a few girls are left, but they live quietly and aren't so much in the public eye as formerly.

Tourists used to pay Chuck to see the sights of Chinatown, and Tic-Tac was Chuck's most important sight. For a price, Chuck would show the strangers Tic-Tac smoking a pipe in an opium den, which was a room fixed up to meet Chuck's ideas of what a sightseer would expect an opium den to look like.

He had been read to out of books about opium dens, and so his was realistic to the last degree.

A real opium smoking party probably wouldn't have impressed the strangers much. They had plenty of these on the roofs. Any place where the smokers could flop comfortably, and there was an engine and a cook handy, was a good place to smoke.

Louis and Big Italy had their first smoke on the night of the adventure of the pigeons. Neither of them knew what nerves were, but when Kid Martin asked them to have a smoke with him and a couple of friends they were glad to accept. They had heard of the delights of the pipe. The engine was always going on the roofs at night.

Tommy Welch was an expert cook. He could manipulate the hop layout—the yen-hok, or long tube with a shank on it—the bit of linen cloth on which the pill is placed in the hole of the yen-hok—called a gie-rag (and many is the hop-head who sucks a gie-rag), and the olive oil bottle with the string in it which makes the best flame for cooking the pills.

Louis and Big Italy were told to swallow the smoke and not to move any more than they could help after they had finished.

So, Louis and Big Italy and Kid Martin and Red McLaurin and Fatty Shea and Tommy Welch lay on some old mattresses in a corner of one of the roofs that night, and felt most romantic.

It was a balmy evening, and the stars were out. Lamps winked here and there among the chimney pots. Someone was playing a guitar, and whistling beautifully with a sweet, piercing fervor somewhere in the darkness. Now and then a drunken shout arose from the busy life below. Once, a woman screamed terribly.

"Lucky Mary's getting hers again," said Tommy Welch.

A girl and a boy walked past, their leather shod feet scrap-

ing on the pebbly, tarred roof. Their arms were about each other's waists. A half-dozen player pianos were jiggling away at once on as many tunes in the various chop-suey restaurants.

Tommy deftly shaped a pill from the molasses-like lai-gum, which is the best stuff in the hop line. And then he fashioned another, and another, keeping each little ball of dream stuff hot and malleable over the tiny olive oil wick. If it cooled he couldn't have done anything with it.

Louis and Big Italy filled their lungs with the smoke, and lay back. Louis didn't know how Big Italy or the others felt, but he felt he was the most important and happy figure in a lovely, rosy world. He felt better than he ever had felt in his life. He thought about Sally, and then he thought about other girls who were purely imaginary, and much more beautiful than Sally ever was or any mortal girl ever would be. He had created a regular Mohammedan heaven out of the one magic pill.

It was a difficult mental and physical condition to describe. It was the same as being drunk on alcohol, only it was different. He had a great exaltation of spirit, and a wild desire for Sally again. He could kill a thousand Mules for a few minutes of loving from Sally.

"We should 've had some dames," Big Italy said mildly and dreamily.

And then, Louis was sick. He was violently nauseated. No one paid much attention to him as he did a good imitation of a sea-sick landlubber who just had been offered a bit of salt pork on a string by an outwardly sympathetic mariner.

He was pale and shaky when he slipped down the particular aperture in the roof that led to the Beretti flat, just underneath. Ma Beretti was sitting up waiting for him, her work-hardened and stained hands mending a jacket of Pa Beretti's.

Louis did not have to be told that his three sisters were in bed. Strangely enough, in this general atmosphere of moral

looseness, there was no more chance of their ever being anything but virgins until the time of their marriage than if they had been immured in iron cages on the top of distant mountains, guarded by dragons.

Just overhead, the engines still were going; boys and girls were making illicit love; and plots of thefts were being hatched. In the tenement next door the white girls were doing their usual nocturnal business in commercial passion with Mules from Jersey, and Mules from Long Island, and Mules from Chinatown.

Scores of fan-tan and crap games were in operation. The shock house on the ground floor was absorbing nickels and spewing out staggering, half-crazed victims.

Over Ma Beretti's head on the dingy, ugly, red-figured wallpaper was a figure of the Christ on the Cross, a distorted, pale, anemic figure out of drawing, with crimson where the torturing wounds had been. Statues of several saints were faintly visible in the lamplight.

Her three daughters—Rosa, seven, Maria, ten, and Angelina, seventeen—had said their prayers long ago, and were sleeping sweetly and peacefully together in the front room.

They knew that God, and Father McCann, would smite them if they sinned. They also knew that Pa Beretti would disown them. They knew further than that that any backsliding on their part would break their mother's heart. But the greatest fear they had was that they didn't know what their brother Louis would do, and this doubt alone, with all other reasons eliminated, was enough to keep the three sisters in the paths of virtue.

Louis was a terrible figure in his family, though none of them was conscious exactly of his menace, because they knew he loved them with the devouring, vengeful, jealous love of their hot blood.

He wasn't afraid of anyone or anything—Louis Beretti. And he had in him a deathless spark to win against any odds. When he was twelve years old all the boys of the gang had been swimming off the docks when a game was started to see who could stay under longest. After everyone else had gone under, and Jimmy Spanish had stayed under a minute and twenty seconds, and was strutting about in pride of victory, Louis unemotionally dived in.

Two minutes later, Big Italy and Red McLaurin found Louis unconscious, hanging on to a spiling with his two great hands. Louis never would have come up if Big Italy hadn't gone down after him, and if Big Italy hadn't been callous enough and strong enough, to bite and tear away his death grip on the spiles.

When Louis was fifteen, his big brother Peter, then eighteen, came home pretty well marked up. His eyes were bruised and closed, two front teeth were gone, and an ear was hanging askew. Peter wasn't like Louis, who never would have told if anyone had beaten him up.

Big Nose Weinstein, a tough guy from the East Side, had done the job. Louis hadn't gotten his growth by any means at that time. His frame wasn't set; his shoulders hadn't widened and solidified. He still had a lot to learn about fighting.

He brooded over Peter's humiliation for two days. Later, when in a similar mood he would drink, and smoke opium while he brooded. He always had to get all hopped up before he reached the proper maniacal fighting fury.

Louis met Big Nose Weinstein in front of Public School 23 at Bayard and Mulberry streets. He was helped by the fact that Big Italy and Red McLaurin were with him, and that Big Nose was alone.

But Louis hit Big Nose so hard and so expertly, with his left fist on the point of the jaw, that Big Nose was seeing stars

when Louis brought his right hand into Big Nose's midriff with all the strength he had in him. And when Big Nose sprawled on the pavement, Louis kicked him savagely in the face and the stomach.

Big Nose Weinstein was taken to the hospital in an ambulance and, when he came out, for some reason or another there were no reprisals. Big Nose wasn't thought much of anyway in his own bailiwick. The affair was regarded in gang circles as a private one, in no way reflecting upon the social standing of that set on the East Side which the large-nosed one did not grace. And Big Nose thereafter was a butt. He was known as yellow.

"Most everyone is yellow inside," Big Italy said to Louis. "The only guy that can win is the guy that's all set to win no matter how much it hurts him. He's just got to win. That's you, and that's me. We'd rather be dead than be licked."

When Ma Beretti looked up at her strange child on this morning, there were unshed tears in her eyes. She prayed a great deal more for Louis than for all her offspring put together. She didn't have to worry about Pa Beretti, or Peter or John, who was a year younger than Louis. Peter had gone to school until he could pass a civil service examination, and now was in the Street Cleaning Department. John was good-natured and kindly, and helped his father at the fruit stand, to which recently had been added a soda fountain—sodas of any flavor for three cents a glass.

"Where have you been until this hour, Luigi?" she asked, using the Italian form of his name.

"At the club," said Louis. He usually was monosyllabic and abrupt with his family, even with his mother, who always was the greatest person on earth to him.

"What makes you so pale: are you sick?" she asked anxiously.

"I had some Chink food an' I threw up on the way home," Louis said.

"Well, say your prayers, my dear," Ma Beretti said wistfully. "I wish you would go to the school and be a bookkeeper or something. I am afraid you are keeping bad company."

"Oh don't bother me," Louis said, and went in the room where his two brothers were sleeping, shed his clothes, said his prayers, as he always did, and went to sleep.

Two hours later, at 5 o'clock, Pa Beretti awoke. He slept in his underwear and socks, so all he had to do was put on the shirt, trousers, shoes, vest and coat that he wore through the week, and drink his usual two ounces of matutinal whiskey, and he was ready for breakfast.

This morning, Ma Beretti had made him a zabaglione, a dish of beaten-up egg yolks usually flavored with Marsala wine, but in this instance strengthened with coffee and cream because it was breakfast.

"What time did Luigi come in?" Pa asked.

"It was 3 o'clock," Ma said. "And I am so worried over that boy I don't know what I will do. I am afraid he keeps bad company at the club. And there are so many bad boys and bad girls here where we have to live to be near your business."

"Unk," grunted Pa, "Louis has got to go to the business school and learn to be a bookkeeper. I will talk to him now."

"No, you better let him sleep now," said Ma Beretti. "I will talk to him. This is Saturday anyway. And he cannot start in the school until Monday."

When Pa Beretti came home for lunch, at which he drank a quart of red wine of his own manufacture, as he always did, and at which he ate prodigiously, as he always did, of soup, and rolled and stuffed flank steak with plenty of garlic, and spaghetti, and a heavy sweet dessert, of canned strawberries on cake, smothered in cream, Louis had gone out.

"But he will go to the school on Monday," Ma Beretti said. "He has promised me. And it will be $10 for the school."

"All right," said Pa Beretti. "All right. But we can't have any more fooling. Louis has got to be a man and earn a man's living. And I don't want him to have to work as hard as I did and as I have to work yet for that matter. These young folks can't stand what we did."

Stuffed with red wine and with rich food, Pa Beretti always slept for an hour after lunch. John, and one or two of the girls looked after the fruit and soda stand. He went to sleep right away, and began to snore heavily, his meagre figure stretched out on the hair cloth sofa in the kitchen giving no indication of the oceans of wine, and the mountains of victuals which daily passed through it.

Ma Beretti, whose big fruitful abdomen, and whose richly nourishing bosom would have given any observer reason to believe that she found most of her earthly pleasure at table, always said that she didn't eat enough to keep a bird alive.

"Maybe I get fat from the smell of the things I cook," she would say.

Perhaps Ma Beretti tasted more of the savory dishes that steamed and sputtered on the range in her kitchen than she herself realized. Anyway, she never was seen to eat very much at meal time. And yet she always weighed a little more every year. And her feet bothered her more and more, and her legs swelled more annoyingly as time went on.

First up in the morning, and last to bed at night, Ma Beretti was a magnificent and unconscious monument to those qualities of wifehood and motherhood about which public speakers and writers have sentimentalized since housekeeping first began in caves.

When she and Pa were married, Ma promptly got herself in the family way, and never got out of the appearance of that

condition afterwards. When Pa first had vague thoughts of leaving their home in Italy and adventuring to the United States, she not only acquiesced, but urged him with vigor to that course.

When they landed at the old Barge Office, Ma decided that the fruit business was a good one, and she looked after the stand while Pa slept.

A babe in arms and another in her accustomed body was nothing except natural to her. She was all of women rolled into one to the hard working, frugal Pa Beretti, and if she ever noticed another man after she first met Pa, it was with no more interest than she observed another woman.

Styles were for someone else: shape was an indelicate subject; she could do anything Pa could do, and do it longer and better. She didn't mind at all getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning, and working right through until 1 o'clock the next morning.

Ma Beretti had a bit of mustache on her upper lip, and a mole from which a tuft of hair sprouted just under the first of her three chins. Her black hair was drawn straight back from her forehead in the way that Italian painters adorn their Madonnas. Only there were creases in Ma's forehead.

She didn't wear corsets, and her wrapper-like black dress was caught together with the appearance of careless haste by a big, old-fashioned gold pin. Her shoulders were a bit rounded, and her stomach beat even her noble bosom to all destinations by a margin of three or four inches.

But Pa and all of the Berettis loved Ma Beretti so much that it was past their own comprehension. They didn't realize how much they depended on her for material and spiritual needs, any more than they realized how much they depended upon breathing to keep alive.

Everyone—Pa's regular customers, the neighbors, the neigh-

bors' children—loved Ma Beretti, without knowing that they loved her. If she thought a youngster was hungry, she handed him a big slab of bread and butter. If someone was going to have a baby, there was Ma Beretti with rough hands that were by some miracle the gentlest hands in the world, and soft, deep brown eyes that seemed to say:

"I've suffered everything any woman ever can suffer, and it is nothing after all except life—come on, hurry up and get this over with and we'll get back on the job again."

Ma Beretti never missed church, and she never missed confession, and no member of her family missed either. Louis went to confession a week after the episode of Sally Yee. And there had been other similar episodes too, by that time, because Louis never was a chap to overlook what he considered a good thing, once he had learned about it.

What Father McCann may have said to Louis on that occasion, or what he ever had to say to Louis Beretti about his transgressions, which were many, was known to no one except the priest and Louis and their God. But Louis told God everything he did through the priest. God was his only confidant—and sometimes he held out on God.

When Louis had gone to this confession he was supposed to be attending business school, according to the promise he had made his mother. He had paid his $10, and was supposed to report at 2:30 P.M. every day.

But Louis was not of the stuff of which scholars are made. The evening of the second day, he and Big Italy and the gang had broken into a clothing store and gotten away with a small haul of coats and suits, and rabbit skin furs.

Big Italy had become a truck driver. That was the ambition of every lad, who had a desire to steal in his veins, and the preliminary training of having robbed toy stores first, and then small general stores afterwards. A truck driver had wonderful

chances for paying robberies. He had a truck in which to cart off the proceeds of the robbery, just as a pirate has a ship in which to sail off with the spoils of piracy.

So, after Louis got to school on the third day, he couldn't keep his mind away from Big Italy driving his truck onto one of the piers. He could see a case on the truck, as it entered the pier. And Louis knew it would be an empty case—a fake.

Then he could see Big Italy coming off the pier with four cases on his truck, being checked at the gate for three cases in addition to the one with which he had driven in. But Louis knew that the original fake case was on the pier, and that what Big Italy had reason to believe was a case of valuable goods had taken its place on the truck. It was as easy as that.

Louis looked at the teacher. The teacher was a sap—probably got thirty or forty dollars a week for teaching guys to make marks in books. Where could a guy find any fun that way? It was a pleasantly warm day—too warm to be stuck in this room with sweat running down your back, fiddling and fussing with a pen in big fingers which never were meant to handle a pen anyhow. Louis laid down the pen, and got up and walked out.

"To hell with school," he said.

CHAPTER III

Louis Beretti officially was a truck driver. He and Big Italy drove trucks around the streets looking for unguarded packages. Sometimes they got a bale of silk. Sometimes they got a case of eggs. It was a sport that contained something of the uncertainty of fishing, and furnished a deal more excitement.

When he was too lazy to drive a truck, Louis went aboard ships and bought birds of paradise. It was against the law to import birds of paradise, but females insisted upon wearing them, and so there was a brisk trade in smuggling them into New York.

It was easy to dispose of stolen merchandise through fences. Sol Levy was one of the more popular of the many fences. Like the others his ostensible business was a basement clothing store in Houston street.

So Sol stood on the corner near his store, and was glad to slip Louis or Big Italy, or any of the other lads who gamboled about the lower city on trucks, a five dollar bill for fifty or a hundred dollars worth of merchandise.

"I just found a case," Louis said to Sol. "How much'll you give for it?"

"Business is bad," Sol said. "Business is so rotten I don't know if I can keep in business, but I will give you five dollars and take a chance."

Louis took the five dollars and got himself some opium, and

a girl. It was harder to get girls without the opium, because in those days before the war, and before prohibition, free loving was not so plentiful in New York. The girls were more or less segregated, and insisted on getting paid for their favors to chance acquaintances. Louis and his friends, however, did very little, if any, paying.

They got the opium, and the girls provided the room, and they got good loads on from the opium, and loved the better for it.

Louis and Big Italy and the others didn't call themselves pimps, but they got free love from the girls, and not infrequently they borrowed a bit of change from them.

Louis didn't confine his activities to any one field. He noticed that a new automobile was parked every day in the same place in a side street in back of City Hall.

Automobiles weren't so common in those days, and protection against theft wasn't so good. It wasn't unusual for the keys with which a car was locked to be stamped with the license number of the car.

Louis wrote to the manufacturer of the new automobile he had seen, giving its license number, and saying that he needed a new set of keys. He explained the change of address by saying that he had moved.

A few days later, a duplicate set of keys for the car arrived. Louis and Big Italy climbed into the car and drove it over to Jersey to a garage that they knew over there. Half an hour afterwards the car was being fitted to a different body. And Louis and Big Italy had invented a new racket.

Some of the mob also did a little business peddling coke. That was a trade that wasn't looked down upon from such heights of disdain in those days. Big Italy was an active peddler. Louis made a couple of deliveries for Big Italy, but he didn't like it.

"I don't mind killing a guy if I have to," he said to Big Italy, "but this coke business aint for me. Those poor junkies make me sick."

Louis felt then, and never changed his mind afterwards, that smoking opium was different from sniffing coke or heroin, or using a needle, or swallowing pills.

His prejudice, strange for his surroundings, against cocaine, was not lessened by an experience he had after making his second and last delivery for Big Italy. He had just slipped the little packet to Loose Foot Harry Smith, a junky, who was shaking so hard when Louis got to him that his false teeth were rattling. Loose Foot couldn't live without his coke, and every nerve in his carcass was twanging in discord when he met Louis. He was crazy with the agony of deprivation. Louis was nauseated at the spectacle of Loose Foot.

He had just turned away when a hand fell on his shoulder. Louis turned quickly, but another hand grabbed his other arm, and a blackjack thumped on his cap covered head with stunning force. Through pain-blinded eyes Louis recognized Detectives O'Connor and Wheeter, who worked on the Narcotic Squad.

Wheeter swung his blackjack again, and O'Connor hit Louis in the stomach. Sick, blind and dizzy, Louis half-stumbled, half was carried by the detectives to the Police Station. There, Wheeter and O'Connor took him in the back room.

"Now, you bastard," Wheeter said, "you're goin' to tell us where you got the stuff."

"What stuff?" Louis said.

O'Connor knocked him down, and he and Wheeter waited for Louis to get on his feet again, which Louis did slowly and painfully.

"I wish I had you two bastards without your jacks for five minutes," Louis said, through bleeding lips.

Both detectives hit Louis together, and he went to the floor again.

For an hour, the detectives badgered and beat and swore at Louis Beretti. Louis had been on an opium drunk the night before, and hadn't had even a dish of black coffee. It was a cold afternoon in late December, but the big radiators in the back room of the Police Station were shaking and hissing with steam pressure. The room was like a furnace. Sweat and blood were dripping in imperfect solution from Louis' head. His brain was reeling. Nausea swept over him in waves. He didn't think he could stand the agony a second longer. But the agony continued.

"Where did you get the stuff?"

"What stuff?"

"Bang!" And Louis staggered under a fresh blow.

The door opened and Detective Sergeant Haldan walked in.

"Hey!" Haldan said. "Cut that out, you bums. You ain't got any right to hit a citizen."

Haldan had a genial face, and a pleasant, gentle manner.

"You get more out of a prisoner anyway," he continued, "by treating him like a man. Kindness'll get you further than being rough."

"Would you like a cup of coffee and a sandwich?" he said to Louis.

"I could drink a cup of coffee," Louis said.

"Bring a cup of coffee and a nice chicken sandwich," Haldan said.

Haldan turned to Louis again, and said:

"Would you like a cigarette too?"

Louis was suspicious of this solicitude, but he figured he had nothing to gain by ignoring it, and nothing to lose by accepting it as genuine. So he said:

"A cigarette would be fine."

The door opened, and a hand holding a cup of coffee with a sandwich appeared. Haldan took the coffee and sandwich, and walked over to Louis, who was trembling despite himself now from the let down from his torture.

"Here's the coffee," Haldan said kindly.

"You son-of-a-bitch," he added, swishing the hot fluid in Louis' freshly scarred face.

"You bastard," he shouted squashing the sandwich in Louis' eyes.

"You pimp," he shouted still louder, and smashed Louis with his fist in the mouth, knocking loose two teeth, and sending Louis reeling across the room to the floor again.

Two hours later an ambulance surgeon was called from Bellevue. He patched and sewed, and then took Louis away with him suffering from "contusions of the face and body, a lacerated scalp, and possible fracture of the skull." He had been picked up that way on the street, the police said.

Louis hadn't told them anything.

Louis didn't have a fractured skull either, but he was pretty badly done up. He took it philosophically, however. He knew that if he had been an innocent individual the police wouldn't have mauled him. They hadn't any right to beat up anyone according to the law, but they didn't pay much attention to the laws when it came to handling gangsters. And Louis had no uncertainty about how they regarded him.

When it came to pushing a guy around, Louis was no slouch himself. His only kick was that the cops were only able to push him around because of their organization and their weapons. He'd have given all he had to have met any of them on even terms.

Louis came out of the hospital after a few days rest, much better off, except for a few scars, than he was before. He hadn't been getting much sleep, and the hospital had refreshed him.

Louis worked for about three months as bartender in Palermo's. Palermo ran a Raines Law saloon. There was a back room with plain tables at which girls could sit, and there were sandwiches on each table—a bit of bologna or ham between two dried slabs of bread. No one ever ate the sandwiches. They were permanent proofs that Palermo's was a hotel under the Raines Law, and didn't have to observe saloon closing hours.

There were rooms upstairs over Palermo's, where a girl and a feller could go after they had concluded the necessary preliminaries over drinks at the tables.

The partitions upstairs were thin, and what occupants said and did in one room were no secrets from occupants in another room. If a guy said to a girl, "I'll give you a dollar more to take off your shirt too," he was telling not only the girl, but also the other guests of Palermo's what a reckless guy he was.

Palermo's had some degree of class, however, because the partitions ran clear down to the floor. And men patrons were comparatively safe, as it was no creep joint.

A creep joint was an establishment where a confederate crept into the room and went through the clothes of a chap who had become too absorbed in the girl he was with to be paying any attention to clothes, or what was in them.

Palermo's wasn't a panel joint either. In a panel joint, a careful guy could hang his clothes in the closet and think they were safe. But they weren't. The back of the closet turned on oiled hinges, so that the clothes hung on the hooks could be swung into a closet on the other side of the partition. A guy often wondered how he had lost his valuables, when he started to dress in a panel joint.

Knock-out drops, which were chloral hydrate, and Micky Finns were not unknown to Palermo's, however. A girl could slip knock-out drops in a feller's drink, if the feller looked like good pickings. And a girl occasionally did.

Louis passed out a couple of Micky Finns himself. They are to epsom salts what trinitrotoluol is to old-fashioned gunpowder. Louis gave them to barflies, which are human derelicts who, having spent all their substance for alcohol, still flutter around the bar in the hopes of helping other patrons spend theirs. The two barflies who got Louis' Micky Finns flitted immediately after they partly recovered from the shock, and never came back.

The only trouble Louis had was with three or four young chaps, who wanted to be tough. They walked up to the bar, when it was busy, took their time about ordering, and then ordered beer, and then let the beer get flat, and then said, through their teeth:

"Put a fresh head on it: see?"

Louis let them annoy him for two or three evenings. Then, one night when three of them were stalling at the bar, Big Italy walked in. Louis leaned over to Big Italy and said:

"Look out for my back, will you, Italy? I'm sick of these tough guys."

"I'll look out for your back all right," Big Italy said.

Louis came out from behind the bar, and knocked the three young thugs stiff with as many punches. Then he went back behind the bar again. When the three regained consciousness, Louis said:

"Now, God damn it, stand up there like men, and drink your drinks."

The three stood up at the bar and drank their drinks.

Louis got a reputation out of that too. The fame of his strength and deadly precision in hitting spread through lower Manhattan.

"You don't have to be a big muscle guy any more," Big Italy said. "You can play centerfield now."

The theory in gangland is that the big muscle guy who does

the actual beating up, or shooting, never gets very far. But a chap who kills one or two tough guys himself, and shows himself more handy than most, always can get plenty of big muscle followers to work for him. They're glad to do it, and bask in the leader's reflected glory. The leader may be establishing an alibi by playing pinochle at a spot far removed from the scene of action: then he is playing centerfield.

"I like action, Italy," Louis said. "Give me a few drinks, and I like to sock 'em."

Louis was a waiter too, but he didn't like that job, and didn't last more than a few days. He worked in the Haymarket, when the drinking dance hall was in its heyday. But he wasn't so expert at toting rows of drinks under his arms past the checker, which was one way the waiters made money in that place.

But Louis Beretti was too restless to stick to a job. Jobs bored him. All he wanted was five dollars a night for opium and a girl. When he had more money he shot craps, or played the ponies.

"Only dumb bastards want to work," he said.

CHAPTER IV

"Ha! Ha! That's a good one, Louis," said Red McLaurin at the club Sunday night.

"What's a good one, you half-a-bastard?" asked Louis.

"Your goin' to church this morning," said Red.

"He spends the night robbing an express company, and before he goes home he goes to church. Maybe Louis is goin' to be a priest," said Tommy Welch.

"A guy's got a right to go to church hasn't he?" said Louis, mildly, looking around out of bright, round brown eyes, in which there wasn't the slightest expression of mirth, while his white teeth were bared in what he may have thought was a pleasant smile, but what really succeeded in being nothing but a purely muscular grimace.

"How much of the thousand bucks you got did you put in the plate?" said Red.

"Ha! Ha!" said Louis, still going through the motions of smiling, but not really smiling at all. "Let's all have a drink."

"With what's left of the thousand bucks," said Red.

"There's your drink, Red," said Big Italy in his composed, low, toneless voice, which for some reason always commanded attention wherever it was heard, and more often than not had an effect utterly different than the intent of the words it uttered. In this case, Red took it to mean that he had said

enough. So he shut up, and closed his fingers around his whiskey glass.

Louis believed the express company wouldn't go hungry because of the few odds and ends that he and his friends took. His heart rather warmed over the fact that he had been able to give a couple of junkies he knew a finnif apiece for some of their needed narcotic, and he didn't despise himself over having staked a couple of guys who were out of work to fifty bucks each.

"All the wife has got for supper is a plate of complaints" is the way one of the guys explained the domestic situation, when Louis inquired about it.

Saturday and Sunday nights were occasions when the club held its rackets. There was dancing and drinking. There was a piano player and plenty of beer and whiskey. There were no chaperones.

On this Sunday, about 1 o'clock in the morning, five strange young men entered the hall. One glance was enough to inform the club members that a delegation of the Hudson Dusters, from up around Greenwich Village way, had dropped in looking for excitement.

In a moment, one of the young men had grabbed a partner and was revolving rapidly with her over the thronged floor.

Now, "twisting," as it is termed in the racket giving set, is a grave breach of etiquette. It is much graver and much more far reaching in its possible effects than might be the tossing of a glass of pink lemonade in a hostess's face at a garden party, or hurling a dish of soup in a host's face at a dinner. "Twisting" upsets the orderly progress of a dance, and no guy does it unless he is crazy, or is looking for trouble.

On the other hand, no guy tells a "twister" to stop his offensive gyrations unless he is ready to back up his request with anything from a beer bottle, or a goblet transformed into an

excellent emergency weapon by the simple expedient of knocking off its pedestal bottom, thus fashioning a nice jagged striking edge; or a chair, or a revolver, or a sixteen inch cannon, if one happens to be handy.

If a "twister" should stop when you tell him to stop, then he is yellow. If a "twister" doesn't stop when you tell him to stop, then you must sock him immediately or you are yellow. If the shooting doesn't begin immediately it's due within a few hours.

This is one of those delicate, chivalric customs which never can be varied in gangland. If a guy suffers anything that can be construed as insulting from another guy, he is through so far as prestige is concerned in that world.

If this "twister" wasn't stopped, all members of Big Italy's and Louis Beretti's club promptly became bums and lice. Any graft they had, such as the cut in their club crap game, would be levied upon. Their girls would leave them. They'd be worth a nickel a bunch in their own quaint nomenclature.

Big Italy started for the offender, but Louis Beretti reached him first.

"Hey, feller. Cut it out," said Louis with that purely muscular smile of his.

The feller just looked at Louis and kept on whirling.

"Bop!"

Louis swung a big fist, and the feller went down and out. And the middle knuckle on Louis' left hand made the first leg of the journey in the direction of his elbow that it was going to continue at intervals for a long time.

A bottle knocked Big Italy unconscious.

Girls screamed. The guys all yelled.

Fists flew. A knife flashed down Louis' neck, as he flailed his enormous balled fist into the jaw of the bottle wielder and drove another knuckle back. Hell was to pay for a moment.

Girls had dived for the floor, and through doors. Some had hands on ears, dreading pistol shots. The lights went out.

There wasn't any shooting. The five Hudson Dusters were thrown out into the street, and the racket went on.

After the racket was over, Big Italy, Louis, Red McLaurin, Tommy Welch, Kid Quick, Fatty Shea and Jack Quinn found themselves together. It had never been mentioned that they were a gang. They just naturally had coalesced. They had grown up together, and they had been through tough times together. They knew what they had to do now without talking about it.

They had some rooms in which to drink and play cards and practice boxing and wrestling. And they naturally called it a club. They threw a racket once in a while, and now some strangers had crashed one of their rackets. If they wanted to throw any more rackets in the future with any degree of safety from interference by other playfully minded strangers they had to take steps.

They all looked at Big Italy, and Big Italy just sat and puffed a cigar which seemed a deal too big for his face and looked at them out of his curiously bright brown eyes.

They all were drinking whiskey straight. They would cover the bottom of a glass with the fiery liquid, and toss it down straight, without any water with it or after it.

"I guess we've got a date next Saturday night," Big Italy said after a half hour or so. "So long."

They all said "So long," except Louis, and went out.

Louis and Big Italy left together. They had a little flat over East with two dames. And they liked to go over there and smoke a pill with the dames. When they had a good load on from the hop, and the dames had a good load on, loving was very pleasant. And the twelve or fourteen hour sleep that followed was not to be sneezed at.

Of course, some guys didn't sleep off their loads but went maundering around the streets with white faces and heavy lidded eyes, so full of hop they could hardly see. But Louis and Big Italy slept theirs off. And Louis didn't smoke every night, either. He went home now and then because his mother worried so much. She worried when she saw his face a bit white, because she hadn't lived for years in Chinatown for nothing. But when he lied to her she loved to believe him.

This morning they knew where they were going, just as they knew where they were going every night until next Saturday night. They were going to get all hopped up. There was no mistake about that.

There were a couple of tumble down beds in the flat. They slept in those. They lay around on the floor, with the engine going, Louis with his head on May's belly, and Big Italy with his head on Nelly's belly. And May cooked the pills.

May also smeared oil of wintergreen on a bit of newspaper and held a match under it. The wintergreen killed the smell of the hop. The detectives were wise, and if they were after you they would get you anyway. But there was no sense in waving a red flag at a bull, or thumbing your nose at a detective. You might as well make it easy for him to let you alone if he wanted to.

No one said anything during this ceremony. Who wanted to shoot off his mouth when he had thoughts like that, wonderful and indescribably voluptuous and delightful thoughts that you couldn't tell anybody about exactly, but that certainly made smoking the pipe the greatest adventure in life. A year in China, now, with the very finest hop in the world, and an expert cook to do nothing but cook—and dames—there was a dream of Elysium.

Big Italy and Louis hadn't swapped a word that meant anything more than to pass this or that, or what time is it, or some-

thing of that nature, when Saturday evening rolled around. Then Big Italy said:

"Look, Louis, you gotta family, and I like your mother. You owe her something after all. You got responsibilities. Why don't you stay outa this?"

"Aw, shut up, Italy," Louis said.

"All right," said Italy.

They walked around to the club, and met the rest of the mob. And Italy handed each of them two guns. He didn't tell them anything. They were all hopped up.

A big touring car was waiting outside the club. Joe Bergman, from the East Side, was at the wheel. Joe was a tough guy himself, but he didn't have anything to do with this party, except drive the uninvited guests to it, and drive them away again—maybe. And again, maybe not.

They pulled up in front of a building, and climbed out. They crowded up a stairway, and came to a door through which came light, sounds of shuffling feet and a tinkling piano. They went through the door. Some girls screeched, and a man swore.

"Christ!"

"Here's luck, you bastards," said Big Italy pleasantly, and the artillery in his hands roared.

Louis always was a hound for close quarters. He never cared much for guns. And he was out in the middle of the enemy before he realized what he was doing. Then he pushed the guns he held up against flesh and pulled the triggers. Then he whaled away mightily with his fists. He felt great. A tremendous explosion rocked his brain and he lost consciousness.

Next he knew his head was hurting like hell. He would have liked to have howled with the pure agony of it, only one of his first principles was to keep his mouth shut and take it—whatever it was.

Where was he? His head was full of fire and sparks. Something was pressing on it. He opened his eyes and saw a policeman. Was he in jail? Back of the policeman was a nurse. He was in a hospital then.

"He's conscious, officer," the nurse said.

Two men in plain clothes wavered near the cot. Detectives. One of them said:

"You're going to die. Do you want to come clean before you go?"

"I don't know anything. Get Father McCann," said Louis, and fainted.

Louis didn't die, and he didn't tell the cops anything. They charged him with homicide, and held him in the Tombs for three months, after he was through with the hospital. But he never told them anything. Nobody told the cops anything.

Four of the Dusters were dead, and three of them might be permanently disabled.

Big Italy had been a fellow patient and a fellow prisoner. He had sent the rest of the gang back down the stairs to the getaway car. He had stayed to smash the skull of a guy who had been on the point of giving Louis the works as he lay on the floor, using one of the revolvers which had jammed.

He had seen Little Italy running off the roof, bare brown feet groping in air: a thin childish scream had died again into awful silence. And he had gone to Louis as water runs to meet water, and blood rushes to meet blood. They were pals—Louis Beretti and Big Italy.

Louis had a big dent in the top of his head, a bullet scar on his right cheek, and another in his left shoulder when he reported at home for the first time.

Ma Beretti wrapped no soft arms around his neck and whispered no sweet nothings in his ear. She put her hands on her hips, and spoke to him in Italian. And what she said was not

for him alone but for any tenants of that and adjoining tenements who chanced to be in.

Louis was too busy eating fancy food full of garlic, and drinking rich red wine to bother much anyhow. His mother had to blow off steam. He knew that. And he also knew that, give Ma a rolling pin, and sight of the guy who had fixed him up like this, she could relieve her pent up feelings even better. Louis understood his family.

As far as he was concerned, he couldn't see how he had done anything at all out of the way. He couldn't have continued to live as a free white man in Mott street if he hadn't acted just as he had. God knew he hadn't looked for trouble, but when trouble came it hadn't found him running in the wrong direction.

What the hell! Why, Pa Beretti couldn't even have run his fruit stand without paying tribute if Louis hadn't conducted himself in a proper manner. Probably those Hudson Dusters had had enough for a while. They had looked for what they got. They should be satisfied.

Ma said he should get a respectable job and go to work, and get married and raise a family, and be a man like his father instead of a no good loafer, bringing disrepute on a good name. Look at the company he was keeping. Look at the nights he hadn't come home. Look at the mess he had gotten into. Look at the hospital—the jail. That she ever lived to see the day when a son of hers should have been in jail she couldn't really believe.

"Wait a minute, Ma," said Louis. "Wait a minute. You're all mixed in your dates. I went to a party, and some tough guys started shooting and fighting. You've heard of those tough guys, Ma.

"Well, could I help it if some tough guys got drunk and shot me and hit me? You've told me that was the way I was

born, that a bullet hit you down on the street, and I was born right there. I guess bullets were chasing me before I was born, and are after me yet.

"I'm not a tough guy, Ma. You know that better than anybody. I might stand up for my rights if some one hit me first, but you know I never was looking for trouble with anyone."

"You should be a good boy, Louis. And are you going to Mass with me in the morning like you always did?"

"That's a bet," Louis said. "There's nothing like church to make a guy feel good."

CHAPTER V

Six years had passed since Lum Yee's body had been trundled across the East River to the Chinese cemetery in Long Island. And if Lum Yee's spirit ever took advantage of the trail of torn paper scattered from the last coach of his ten coach funeral cortege to find its way back to its old home and Boston Sally, chances were that it wasn't elated by the jaunt.

Boston Sally never had been true to Lum Yee in his life, and she was extraordinarily unfaithful to him in death. The price of her favor dwindled to a mere pill of opium. On occasion she wouldn't even despise a lover bearing a ham sandwich.

Louis Beretti, whose affair with Sally was for a time one of the accepted romances of Chinatown, hadn't seen her for months when one afternoon Tic-Tac Chum told him Sally would like to see him.

Sally was living in one room. Her furniture was a bedstead, a commode, a rocking chair, a table with an oilcloth top, a strip of linoleum for the floor, and an oil stove. The commode was supposed to house a pot, but the pot roamed aimlessly about the room. The commode was also supposed to support a crockery basin and pitcher without a handle, and damaged lips. But the basin and the pitcher might be lurking in the most unsuspected places, and therefore constantly were being stepped into, or on, or against, and being upset.

Sally's wardrobe consisted mostly of a tired and aimless

kimono, which sagged listlessly and half-heartedly about her worn frame. The kimono's failure to make good on its job of covering Sally's nakedness resulted in the revelation of Sally's childlike white skin in blasphemous contrast to her prematurely aged face. She had the body of a little girl, and the features of a hag.

Not satisfied with opium any more Sally had developed a passion for the needle. She mixed the morphine solution in a spoon, heating it over a lamp. Her buttocks were sore from countless bites of the hypodermic.

The morphine puckered Sally's eyeballs to pinpoints, and gave her a devastating thirst for alcohol, which she preferred to absorb in its natural raw state, rather than in any of its more effete manifestations, such as whiskey, gin or brandy.

The day wasn't far removed when Sally's weary spirit was going to leave its abused shell for her sisters in misery to bury by collection. But Sally wasn't worrying about it, and neither was anybody else. Total absence of concern over her condition kept her from realization of it except vaguely. She just happened to be existing in that particular rut, and her mental gaze seldom extended beyond its own horizon. Occasionally, however, it did.

"You probably heard that I came from a good family in Boston," Sally said to Louis Beretti.

"I heard something like that," Louis admitted.

"Well," Sally continued, "like some things you hear, it's got some truth in it. First I want you to promise me, Louis, that you'll never tell anyone what I'm going to tell you."

"Can it! Can it!" said Louis, not offensively, but with gentle weariness. "All of you dames have got stories, and I haven't time to listen to 'em all. Have another pill, and take a nap."

"Listen, Louis. This is serious. I want to tell you a story and

after I have told you the story, I want to know if you will take a trip to Boston and do an errand for me."

"You dames," Louis said, "are a lot of trouble to a guy. I was told when I was a kid that the only thing to do with the dames was to lay 'em and leave 'em. But try and leave 'em."

"You have sisters, Louis."

"I got sisters, but outside of me having to bat one of 'em now and then just by way of showing her that a woman's place is in the home, they ain't much trouble to me," Louis said.

"You love your sisters, don't you, Louis, and you wouldn't like to have one of 'em get in trouble would you, Louis?"

"Now, don't get me going, Sally," Louis said. "Don't get me going. If a guy ever got fresh with a sister of mine I don't like to think about what might happen. I aint a tough guy myself, and maybe I don't act much like I cared for my family now and then, but I just as soon fix one of 'em myself if she ever did anything she shouldn't do. And, as for the guy—don't get me excited, Sally. I don't want to go home and jam one of 'em just because you got me all hopped up, along with this rotgut I've been drinking."

"I have a sister too," Sally said. "And I may have become kind of hardboiled, but I'd hate to see my sister take the same road I took."

"You're a good dame in your way, Sally," Louis replied. "Tell your story, but for Christ's sake be snappy. There's a crap game over at the club, and I've got a yen to roll 'em tonight."

"You'll promise not to tell a word to anybody?" Sally began.

"Can it! Can it!" Louis said pleasantly. "If you hadn't known I never tell anything to anybody you wouldn't have sent me this bid would you? Shoot! Make it snappy."

"Nobody knows my name down here," Sally said. "But my name was Browne, and my father was a lawyer in Holmesville, just outside of Boston. My mother didn't live long after he

died, which was when I was sixteen years old. My sister was three years old then, and she's sixteen now."

"For God's sake," Louis said. "You only twenty-nine, Sally?"

"I'm sixty, Louis, the way I feel, and the way my body is I guess, which is the only way to tell age, after all."

"You don't look that old, Sally, but you sure don't look like a chicken any more. But make it snappy, Sally. Make it snappy."

"Well, we went to live with an aunt, and not to bore you with a long story, Louis, she let me go out riding with a man who owns a shoe factory up there. He got me to take a drink one day. And my head went around, and I didn't want to take another. But he kept asking me to take it, and I did.

"It's an old story, and it sounds silly to be telling it just as if it could have happened to me as easy as that. But that's the way it was.

"Some girls lose their virtue and blossom out in pearl necklaces, diamond bracelets and steam yachts. But more of 'em don't. The next man I went with was younger and better looking, and I got in the family way, and I left home.

"Some of these girls I hear about now-a-days around here seem to have been made wise either by reading birth control pamphlets, or by listening to good advice. I heard a kid of about thirteen just the other day, talking about Florence Cohen down the street. Florence got caught, and this kid said: 'You don't have to worry about me! I'm wise.'

"Anyhow, I won't bore you with the story of how a doctor got me started taking dope, and how I picked up with Chinamen. Only, there was a time when Lum Yee did me a favor by taking me with him. And that's why if you took the trouble you would see that there's a good fresh roast pork on his grave right now, so if there's anything in the idea that a Chink spirit can go hungry, it won't be his."

"What's all this about?" Louis asked. "It aint even interesting."

"Well," Sally said, "it may not be interesting, but I don't want any part of it to happen to my sister Betty. And I have word that the same old goat, who's fifty-six now instead of forty-three, called at my aunt's house yesterday."

"Some system you've got," Louis said. "Some system."

"It's a simple system," Sally said, "when you know it. There's a laundry across the street, and John Chang, an old friend of mine, runs it. John has been watching for me for years."

"Well, what have I got to do with it?" Louis asked. "What do you want me to do—write this old goat a letter, or send him a telegram?"

"I thought you might think of a way to help me," Sally said, smiling a harsh smile. "This is Tuesday. My recollection is that a Sunday afternoon is his favorite time for taking a pretty girl for a ride in the country. I thought you might take a trip to Boston and persuade Old George to leave my sister Betty alone."

"Well," Louis said, "you're too good a dame to be bothered by any old goat. Cook me a pill, Sally. I feel as if a load would do me good."

"Would you like some baked beans, Italy?" Louis said to Big Italy next day.

"Baked beans?" repeated Big Italy in his low, unemotional voice, his strange, bright eyes resting gently on Louis, as he puffed the cigar which was too big for his face.

"I got an errand in Boston," Louis said, "I gotta whisper some advice to a guy up there who's got a dirty nose."

"When are we starting, Louis?" said Big Italy.

"We should be high hat, going to Boston," Louis said. "Hard boiled collars, and no caps."

A softening effect, which was Big Italy's nearest concession to smiling, was visible on Big Italy's face.

"Have a drink, Louis," he said. And they drank.

Old George Westmoreland always had had an eye for pretty girls. He had two pretty daughters of his own—Mrs. Jimmie Van Ness, and Miss Winnie Westmoreland—whose photographs in bathing suits at Palm Beach, or in riding breeches at Pinehurst, or in golfing togs somewhere else, enhanced the rotogravure sections of Sunday newspapers not infrequently. And he had two sons, George, Jr., and Thomas.

Mrs. Westmoreland knew of Old George's little affairs, but what could she do about it? She had everything she wanted. And, except when one of Old George's affairs had gone wrong, and he had decided to drown himself in alcohol for a few days to get over it, he was a very pleasant husband to have around a big house. He was a good-looking old chap, with crispy, reddish hair that showed no white at all to the casual observer. His still presentable figure looked good in a dinner suit, or riding breeches. And he had plenty of money—millions.

Old George felt in excellent fettle when he started out that Sunday after midday dinner which was one of many unpleasant ways in which the Westmoreland household celebrated Sunday.

The sun was shining on the trees and the grass. It wasn't too warm, and it wasn't too cool. It was a jolly day in September. Old George felt good to be alive. Let his wife and the rest of 'em up at the house waste such a day in any way they chose. Old George knew the secret of a good time.

His gray tweed suit wasn't cut along exactly boyish lines, but it certainly didn't make him look any more ancient than he really was. It, and the gay cravat with green and old rose in it, were more in harmony with his mood than with his years.

He felt young and warm and full of ginger when he stopped

the sweetly running motor at the charming little house which harbored Betty Browne. His mottled gray eyes lighted up when he thought of her. She was even prettier than that older sister of hers. By the way, what the devil had become of her anyhow? A slight frown of annoyance creased his brow, and pushed up his thick reddish brows for an instant.

But a moment later he was walking up the walk briskly, shoulders well back, a good looking figure of a man, from his patently expensive Panama hat down past the bachelor button in his lapel to the shining leather of his hand made brown shoes.

Betty's aunt was one of those helplessly sweet and dough-headed old ladies, who cannot understand that anyone who sits in church every Sunday morning, gives liberally to charity, wears becoming clothes, comes of a nice family, has a nice family himself, and has lots of money, possibly can have any evil in him.

She had heard queer tales about Old George, but she laid them to the desire of more unfortunate persons to toss mud at those whom God had selected for special favors. She thought it was real sweet of him to want to take Betty for a ride in the country. When she came to the door in her black bombazine dress, and saw there was no chauffeur in the car she thought that Old George was democratic to drive his own car. And so thoughtful, too.

Betty was a cute little girl with dark brown hair and big blue eyes under a small black felt hat. She wore a blue tailored dress which she had bought for $18 at a bargain, and had been dying to wear, and her one pair of very sheer stockings. She had paid $1.95 for them.

She would have looked lovely if she had been walking down the uneven brick path, and through the gate in the picket fence to be helped into a flivver by a lad somewhere around

her own age. She looked rather pitiful making the same promenade to climb into $17,000 worth of coruscating metal and leather. She didn't fit—except in the myopic eyes of her aunt, and the calculating eyes of Old George.

Old George helped her into the car with great gallantry, and doffed his Panama with genial grace to the aunt. And they drove off, the imported motor making little more noise than a kitten purring.

They drove for three or four hours.

"You don't know how beautiful you are, Baby," Old George said.

"Oh, Mr. Westmoreland!"

"When we are alone, Baby, there is no need for you to call me anything but George. I never saw a little girl whom I admired more. I know an artist in town whom I've already spoken to about painting you. You're the most beautiful little girl I've ever seen—and a beautiful girl is the most marvelous handiwork of God."

"Oh, Mr. Westmoreland, it is terrible for you to say those things to me."

"Please call me George, Baby. You're the sort of girl I've always dreamed about being good friends with."

"But, Mr. Westmoreland——"

"Yes, I know you're thinking that I am so much older than you are, my dear. But I am not old in my ability to appreciate beauty. And if I am mature I know that beauty should be cherished and not wasted. I want to be your friend and your dear aunt's friend. Why, now-a-days youngsters call their fathers and mothers by their first names. For you to call me George is just an evidence that we are friends. Won't you call me George?"

"I will if it will make you feel happier—George."

"That's better, my dear," Old George said kindly, laying a

fatherly hand in its yellow pigskin casing on a sheer silk clad knee.

Shortly after dusk Old George turned the car off the main thoroughfare into an apparently little travelled road among some trees. On the traffic lane just abandoned, cars with inquiring searchlights swept by in the night in either direction like monsters of another world.

Betty was vaguely alarmed. She had tremendous respect, awe and admiration for Old George. He was a sort of demi-god to her. He was a father to her. He stood for all that was successful and bright and wonderful in life. His words and his actions were a trifle unsettling. But then, she hadn't been able to explain the reason for his interest in her.

She would have been able to explain it if she had been a great deal more sophisticated, perhaps. In fact, she might have been able to explain it if she had listened to her conscience. But she blinded herself to the reality of the situation—or she was blinded to it by the dazzling glow of George's millions and his amazing automobile, and his gracious manner, and his London-made clothes.

"What are you doing here, George?" Betty asked when the car stopped.

"I just pulled off the road for a moment because I happened to think that we had entirely forgotten about food," Old George said pleasantly. "I have a bite to eat here somewhere. And I thought it would be more cozy in here. Don't you?"

"Isn't the moon beautiful back of those trees?" said Betty.

Old George hauled out a lunch hamper, and he also hauled out a fat, glistening thermos bottle, and a couple of glasses.

"First," he said, "we will drink a toast to our wonderful friendship."

"No," said Betty. "If that is whiskey I can't drink it. I promised my aunt never to drink."

"Now, Betty," Old George argued, "you know that your aunt trusts you with me, and you know that I wouldn't ask you to do anything that wasn't perfectly all right for you to do. You know that, don't you?"

"Y-e-es," Betty said doubtfully. "But I know it isn't right for me to drink whiskey and I don't think you should ask me to do it."

"This isn't whiskey," Old George said, truthfully. "This is an appetizer that I mixed myself for you and me. It is mild and mellow, and I know that you will like it. And I give you my word that it can do you no harm. Come on Betty, don't spoil this perfect day with a childish whim. Why, a baby could drink this. It's no stronger than fresh cow's milk. Come on Betty. Do it for me."

Betty was just stretching out her hand for the cup when Louis Beretti said:

"Take it easy. Take it easy. Don't get excited."

Louis clamped a big hand over Betty's mouth as he spoke, and Big Italy poked a finger into Old George's side just under and in back of the shoulder.

"Stick 'em up," Big Italy said. "And keep 'em up."

Now, maybe Old George thought that Louis and Big Italy had the same sort of designs on the fresh young bit of femininity that he had—and, of course, that would have been too horrible for words—or he recognized that Big Italy was pressing a finger and not the muzzle of a revolver into his side, or he acted with natural recklessness and courage. Anyhow, he pulled a revolver from a side pocket of the car.

CHAPTER VI

Louis and Big Italy had gotten all steamed up for this adventure. Neither of them liked it sober, and they weren't very enthusiastic under the exhilaration of whiskey. But they didn't admit that even to themselves. Old George was a higher muckamuck than they ever had contemplated going up against.

Louis wondered why he told Sally he would do it even while he was telling her. Big Italy privately was astonished at Louis' gallantry, but he refrained from voicing his sentiments. As a matter of fact, Louis took on the assignment, first because he really liked Sally, second because he was tight and reckless when she made her request, and third because he was thirsty for some excitement.

"Saving a dame from losing her cherry is a new one for me," he said to Big Italy. "I'd rather help 'em lose it."

"Maybe we can get somethin' out of it, at that," Big Italy said.

They liked the job less when they found out that Sally's factory owner turned out to be a big noise. They didn't have any trouble following Old George and Betty in Joe Bergman's car. But they were wondering what they were going to do.

"No shootin'," Louis said. "Kill this old goat and we'll burn, or whatever they do to a guy that kills another guy in Boston."

When Old George drove off the road, Louis and Big Italy left Joe Bergman in their car, and walked in. They stopped to have a final drink from a bottle of rye.

When Old George took out the revolver, Big Italy grabbed his hand and said:

"Don't yell now, or I'll bat you one."

"What is this—a hold-up?" Old George said. "If it is, I'll give you my money and what jewelry I have with me. And then I will be very glad to assure you that I will spare no effort to see that you spend as much of the rest of your lives in jail as can be arranged."

"Can it," Louis said. "And the less noise you make, you old bastard, the better for you and the damn."

"If you aren't gone in thirty seconds," Old George replied. "I will call for help."

"If you call for help," Louis said, "it will be the last call you ever make. You shut up."

Yielding to an irresistible impulse Louis struck Old George a sudden smack on the jaw, which stunned but didn't entirely anesthetize. However, it had another, and unexpected result. It loosened Old George's false teeth, and he was mumbling and choking on them, when Louis took him by the back of the neck, and pulled him out of the car, and bent him over with his face to the ground.

"Cough 'em out," Louis said, squeezing Old George's neck.

Strangling, Old George opened his mouth, and two sets of teeth fell to the ground.

"Has the old devil got a wig too, I wonder?" Louis said, suddenly feeling more confidence that this affair was going with him and not against him.

He pushed off Old George's hat, and twitched at his hair. "He's got a wig too—the old bozo," Louis said, holding up a toupee.

"Maybe he's got a wooden leg too, if you look," Big Italy said. "But what'm I goin' to do with this dame? She's dead to the world."

"Give her a drink of booze," Louis said.

So, Big Italy took out his bottle, and poured a generous swallow into Betty's mouth—and over her face, and on her new dress.

Betty gargled, coughed, choked, and opened her eyes. She would have screamed after she got her breath but Big Italy's hand was over her mouth, and Big Italy's soft voice was saying:

"Now, little girl, you just be quiet because we're your friends."

"We came here to stop this old guy here from doin' to you what he did to your sister," Louis said.

Old George was making strange noises with his toothless mouth. Louis let go of his neck and took him by the collar, and straightened him up.

"Is my sister alive?" Betty said.

"She's alive," Louis said, "but she ain't as happy as she might be, and it didn't make her any happier when she heard you was going out with this old guy, who's old enough to be your grandfather."

"Where's my sister?" Betty asked. "I want to see my sister. And please don't hurt Mr. Westmoreland."

"He won't get hurt—much," Louis told her. "But you just sit there and watch me and Mr. Westmoreland have a little talk. First look at the old guy's map when he aint got his teeth or his hair."

Louis straightened up Old George and pushed his face nearer to Betty. Old George looked like a caricature of himself with a big bald spot on his head, and his nose and chin

almost touching. Betty's nerves gave way when she saw him, and she began to cry and laugh hysterically.

"Take me home," she said. "Take me home."

"Do you love this little girl?" Louis said, and slapped Old George heavily on the sunken chops.

Old George cried out hoarsely, and put up his fists in a posture that showed he knew more than a modicum of the art of self-defense. Louis was delighted.

"That's the boy," Louis said, and hit Old George in the right eye, which immediately began to close.

"So, you're a heavy lover?" Louis added, ducking a right uppercut of Old George, and clipping his victim in the other eye.

"Why don't you yell louder?" Louis said. "Don't you want the neighbors to see you?"

Old George finally fell down and stayed down. Louis pushed the neck of the whiskey bottle brutally into his mouth, and Old George gagged down some. The rest of it saturated his clothes. Louis jerked him to his feet again, and hit him again.

After half an hour of it, Old George began to cry weakly.

"Going to leave this little girl alone after this?" Louis said.

"I wish I never had seen her," Old George said as clearly as he could without teeth and through swollen lips.

"You may remember her sister," Louis said. "Well, she's keepin' an eye on you, you old bastard. And if you make any moves that look bad towards Betty, you can expect her sister on your trail."

"Bam!" Louis hit Old George an extra hard sock and knocked him out.

Betty, who had been trembling and crying, said:

"Oh, please take me home. This is terrible. This is terrible. I will die. Where is my sister?"

"You got to look at the old goat who made love to your sister and now wants to fix you up the same," Louis said.

"Lug her over, and make her look," he said to Big Italy.

Big Italy took Betty over and pulled her hands from her eyes. Betty never could forget the sight Old George presented lying there on the grass in the dark. His face was cut and battered; his toothless mouth was open, and his bald head was stained. He looked ribald and horrible.

Louis suddenly was filled with a great rage at Betty.

"And now you dumb little bitch," he said, "look out for yourself, or you'll get fixed good next time."

And he smacked her a tremendous smack across the seat of her dress, a smack so mighty and altogether devastating that it took away her voice, rocked her senses, and left a black and blue mark for her to contemplate in her mirror for many a day.

Big Italy went over to Old George, and took his wallet, his watch, chain and a locket, and an emerald stickpin.

"I guess he won't make much of a squawk about it," he said, "and we got a pretty good expense account for this trip."

"What're we goin' to do now?" he asked.

"We'll stick 'em both in their car, and let 'em continue with their picnic," Louis said. "They oughta have a hell of a time."

"Oh don't leave me with him. Please don't leave me with him," Betty whimpered. "Please take me home with you."

"You wanted to ride with the old goat," Louis said. "Now, ride with him. Throw her in the car," he added.

Big Italy bundled Betty into the front seat.

"You stay there," Louis said. "And you ride home with

the old goat. But don't you ever ride with him anywhere ever again, or we'll get you."

Big Italy and Louis went back to the main road, and climbed into their car. Joe Bergman said:

"You were gone a long time."

"We had a long talk," Louis said. "Let's make tracks for home."

Next day Louis dropped in on Sally.

"Here's something that'll give you a laugh," he said.

And he handed her two sets of false teeth, and the toupee.

"They're Old George's," he said.

"I'd like to have seen 'em riding home together, Louis," Sally said. "Two lovers in the moonlight."

"I'll bet she didn't wait," Louis told her. "I'll bet she climbed out of there, and ran home, and that she'll run every time she sees the old goat after this."

"When Old George dies I won't be putting any fresh pork on his grave," Sally said. "I'd be glad if he starved to death after he's dead."

Louis didn't tell Sally that Betty had been revived with whiskey.

"For Christ's sake! One of the reasons we went to Boston was to stop that dame from havin' a drink," he said to Big Italy.

"She won't ever hook up havin' a drink with havin' a good time," Big Italy said mildly. "What d'you say to us having one?"

"That kid'd be a good lay at that," Louis said, picking up his drink.

CHAPTER VII

When the United States decided to make the world safe for Democracy, Louis was feeling depressed. Ma Beretti had just given him a general going over and hadn't found anything of good in him to discuss. Father McCann had given him to understand that he had a long row to hoe before he could get back in the fold.

Red McLaurin, Fatty Shea and Jack Quinn had been caught on a loft job, and had been sent up the river—to Sing Sing.

Louis had been smoking too much opium. Stealing had lost its kick for the moment anyhow.

"They're going to have a draft," Big Italy said.

"Well," Louis said, "I'm a good Democrat, so I guess I'll go and make the world safe for 'em."

"What the hell do you want to go be a soldier for?" Big Italy asked. "You got a lot of responsibilities."

"Nuts!" Louis responded. "I don't like to work, and I don't get any excitement any more out of the pipe and the girls. And I might as well be a soldier because I go myself as because they come and take me."

"There's some sense in that," Big Italy said.

So Louis volunteered.

Louis washed dishes his first night in camp with Bill Pedersen, of the Westchester Pedersens, Bob Ravenel, a newspaper reporter, and Isador Krupnik, who had decided it would

be good business to beat the draft, and who had a theory that an open air life would built him up physically.

Bill and Bob were peculiar humans. Bill's family had more money and influence than most, and Bob had a large amount of pull in high places. Both of them not only could have had commissions for the asking, but had been urged to take them.

"I feel better to go in this business as a private," Bob said.

"So do I," Bill said. "I want a lot of fun and no responsibility. I want to be able to get tight and look over the girls, and if I happen to be a bit off feed and make a mistake, I want to be the only one to suffer for it. I don't want any responsibility."

Isador had theories. One of them was that Americans never would go to France in large numbers.

"It isn't possible," he argued. "If I thought there was the slightest chance I would have done everything I could to keep out of it. But, having figured it out that I never could get across, I thought the best thing I could do was be a hero and volunteer before I got drafted."

"I don't want to be a hero," Bill said. "I only feel I've got to do what every other feller has got to do, and I might just as well have as good a time as I can while I'm doing it. My governor had it all fixed up for me to be in Washington; and my uncle Jim, the Senator, had it all fixed up for me to be in Paris. And I just slid out and signed up."

Bob Ravenel was a Major when he came back. The only weapon he ever carried was a walking stick.

"I know damned well I never killed anyone anyway," he said.

Bill Pedersen and Louis formed an odd sort of friendship, and the friendship grew stronger as they grew to know each other better. The only girl that Bill was interested in was his

sister Louise. Except for her, all girls were catalogued together: they either would or they wouldn't.

Bill's mother was dead, and his father was busy; and Louise used to go down to the camp in a big car with a chauffeur, or in her own sports model with a friend.

Louis met her on her first visit. It was the first time he ever had met a smart, beautiful girl, and it only was the something in him that had caused him to be a leader in his own environment that enabled him to conceal his secret embarrassment at being on familiar terms with this soft creature in modish clothes.

"She's the whole Ziegfeld chorus rolled into one, but classy, if you get what I mean," he told his mother on one of his trips home.

Louise was blonde and blue-eyed like her brother but Nature, which had formed him on generous proportions, had been in a most dainty mood when fashioning her. She would have dazzled any man—and did.

She was a great puzzle, and a great delight, was Louise. She smuggled cocktails into the camp in big thermos bottles, running a risk of getting them all into serious difficulties, and she smoked cigarettes, and she said "Damn!" with quaint vigor, and "Hell!" when she thought the occasion demanded it. And once, when it was clear that she couldn't help overhearing a bit of exceptional profanity, while she was walking with Bill and Louis, she glanced at Louis and smiled.

Louis had felt a murderous rage upon hearing the profanity. He had been so busy keeping his own speech purged of its usual profane window dressing, that to hear some one else freely doing what he himself would have done under normal conditions, made him frantic. But Louise's calm tolerance acted as a delightful sedative. When she said, "I'll bet you can swear even better than that," Louis suddenly felt as if

he had been decorated. The birds began to sing again; the leaves on the trees, and the grass looked greener and softer, and the sunlight was brighter. It was a great day after all.

Louise's startling informality had been one of the most impressive features about her. Bill had said on that first day:

"Louis I want you to meet my kid sister, Louise. She's a great kid, but rather fond of herself. Louis is the chap I've told you about, Louise."

"Hello, Louis," Louise had said in a husky contralto voice, with the accent that Louis always thought of as affected until he had gotten used to hearing Bill use it. And she had put out her gloved right hand, and taken his in a firm grasp.

Louise caused a deal of commotion in the collection of hastily tossed together wooden shacks which was called a camp. Major General Sheldon, who was in command and who knew her father, always made it a point to chat with her, no matter how busy he was.

"That brother of yours insists on being a buck private," the gallant old General said. "No one can do anything with him."

"I think it's delightfully original, General Sheldon," Louise replied. "There isn't any one else I know who has the nerve to be a private, and I'm proud of Bill."

All the officers would have been glad to be devoted to Louise, but she always spent her time with Bill and Louis, and Isador and Bob, and friends of theirs in the camp. But she liked best to talk to Louis.

"Ask him about himself, Louise," Bill said. "Louis was born in Chinatown, and he has had enough adventures to fill a library."

If Louis didn't tell everything he knew about himself it was because anything like that was an inherent impossibility.

But he did tell about feeling in the sleepers' shoes for money, and about chasing the Chinamen by blowing kerosene at them across matches. And he told of a few fights, and of the rackets. It was thrilling to Louise.

When Bill and Louis got leave, Louise came to camp and drove them to New York in her car. They had dinner in a private dining room in the Hotel Knickerbocker, and they had plenty of champagne and cocktails with the dinner. After that, Louis went home to see his family.

But the next day he took a train from Grand Central, and was met at the station by Bill and Louise and taken to their home. It was a big, rambling brick house, which had been built back in pioneer days by the pioneer Pedersens of bricks made from clay taken right out of the place. The hole where the clay had been was now a duck pond, with ducks and swans floating about on it, and fat gold fish muddling about in it. Two peacocks posed with gorgeous dilated tails for Louis, a second after he stepped from the car.

The hall went right through the house. The rooms were big, with polished dark floors, soft rugs of subdued materials, and old mahogany furniture. Oil paintings in the hall and the drawing room, etchings in the library, and water colors in the smaller rooms were noted by Louis' inwardly dazzled but outwardly noncommittal gaze. They had lunch in the breakfast room, decorated in cream and apple green.

"It's cozier in here than in the dining room," Louise said.

"We always used to eat in the kitchen," Louis commented, and Bill and Louise laughed.

"But we always had something to eat, which is more than you can say for some of the neighbors," Louis added. "This certainly is a swell dump—no place for a guy like me."

"Oh, Louis, don't be a sap," Louise said. "When you and

Bill come back from the war you'll probably be a political boss and have a bigger place than this."

Louis was a subject of interested speculation to Louise. He was so solid and square, and his deep brown eyes bored at you so hard, with smouldering fires beneath. And he was an honest-to-goodness gangster: and Bill said he had killed other men but that it was in fair fights. Bill thought he was great.

"He gives me a big kick," Bill said.

"He gives me a big kick too," Louise said.

After lunch Bill said he was going to run down to the village, and he asked Louis if he wanted to go along.

"He's going to stay here with me, and I'm going to show him around the place, aren't I?" she said, turning to Louis.

"I'll go with Bill," Louis replied.

"Ha! Ha!" Bill said cheerfully. "There's one gent that doesn't fall for you, Little One. He'd rather be with me than with you."

"Gwan," Louis said. "Gwan to town, or wherever you're going, you big bum. I wouldn't care if I never saw you again."

"That's better, Louis," Louise told him. "But I don't think you'll ever be exactly what anyone would call gallant."

Bill drove off in a car, and Louise linked her arm in Louis'.

"Did you ever really kill anybody, Louis?" she asked confidentially.

"Only five or six," Louis said.

"Now you're joking," Louise said. "If you really had killed anybody you'd know exactly how many it was."

"Well, I don't like to take all the credit. You see, there always was some other guys shooting too. I might have killed a dozen, or I might have killed nobody."

"But don't you know?" Louise asked. "Tell me. Did you ever kill anybody?"

"I dunno, Miss Pedersen——"

"Louise," she corrected.

"Well, have it your own way, Louise, then. I dunno. I shouldn't think you'd like to hear about those kind of things. You see, it aint your kind of a world we're talking about."

"It's probably a better one—at least it's more exciting," Louise said. "I've always thought I'd love to be a gunman's Moll. Is that right?"

"Maybe it's right," Louis said with a grin. "They got a lot of words in the newspapers and in books that I can't understand myself. But you couldn't be a gunman's dame, or any tough guy's dame. You aint tough. You're not soft, but you aint tough."

"But did you kill anybody?"

"Well," Louis said, "I had a gun up against a couple of guys and I pulled the trigger until the gun was empty, and later I heard the guys were dead."

"How did it feel?" Louise asked.

"I dunno," Louis said. "I get all steamed up—excited you know. And I wouldn't care what happened."

"You must be pretty strong—Bill says you're a better fighter than he is, and he was the heavyweight champion in college. He says you fight as if it was business, and he fights as if it was fun."

"A guy is likely to fight more like business if he figures he'll get his if he don't," Louis said.

"I'll bet you fought fair," she told him.

"I dunno," Louis replied. "I was what it was the most regular thing to be where I was born and grew up. And it was a tough spot. I'd probably been a Boy Scout if I'd been born in a Boy Scout neighborhood."

"I think you're great, Louis," Louise said.

She was very close to him, and her head was tilted back,

and her blue eyes were suffused with moisture. They had been walking as they talked, and now they were out back of the paddock, concealed from the house by trees, and arbors and buildings. Louis' heart was pounding.

"How many horses you got?" he said.

"Fifteen or sixteen, I guess, I don't know," Louise replied impatiently. "But you don't care about the horses, and I don't either. Let's talk about you."

"Listen Louise," Louis said, pulling out a package of cigarettes, and lighting one carefully. "Get this. We've talked enough about me."

It wasn't so much the words that Louis said, or the tone he used, as it was the stark look from those hard brown eyes of his that made Louise feel as if she had been slapped.

Louis was under no delusions. Here was a dame, and a swell one. He could make her if he wanted to for the minute. But she'd feel pretty sick about it afterwards. She thought she was wise, but she was just dumb. Besides, she was the sister of Bill, and Bill was a regular guy. She was out so far as he was concerned.

Louis knew there was nothing romantic about himself, although he didn't use the word romantic. He didn't care anything about kissing and hugging, and pledging eternal fidelities. In fact, he didn't know from personal experience about such balderdash. Cases of it had come under his observation and filled him with a mild contempt for the guy who was doing it. Louis couldn't tease himself that way. He was too elemental. It was whole hog or nothing with Louis.

He never had experienced the same sensations about any girl that he had with Louise. She gave him a vaguely uncomfortable feeling that perhaps there might be something more in life than direct action, so far as relationship between the sexes was concerned.

"Ha! Ha!" Louis said, moving the smile muscles of his face automatically.

"What are you laughing about?" Louise asked, a trifle indignantly, jarred by the coarse fibre of the forced mirth.

"I was thinking about the dames in France," Louis said. "I'm told they fall for anything with pants on anyway, and that when the pants are soldiers' pants, a guy can't keep 'em away."

"Now you're just crude," Louise said disdainfully.

"I'm a crude guy," Louis told her. "And I've always noticed that dames, who haven't got any sense anyway, are always running after guys in brass buttons. That's why I was willing to be a soldier, I guess. That, and because they'd have got me anyway.

"Come on, Louise," Louis continued, "let's get back to the house and have a drink. I'm dyin' of thirst."

Louise was infuriated clear down to her toes, but except that she was a bit stiffer and more reserved, she didn't show it much. She couldn't forget that this vulgar person, who spoke of girls so disrespectfully, and called trousers pants, and said dames were running after pants, was her guest. He was a conceited and rather coarse animal. But she would have liked to have had him more susceptible. It would have been a new thrill.

Half way through his highball on the front porch, Louis belched.

"Excuse me: I have gas on my stomach," he said, and belched again, mildly but unmistakably.

By the time Bill came home, Louise was determined that if she were going to be moll to a gunman, she'd have to be assured first that the gunman was not afflicted with a gassy stomach.

"Louis Beretti may be a he-man as you say he is, but he

is rather a terrible person, isn't he?" she said to Bill on the way home from the station, where they had left Louis. "His manners are awful."

"He's a man's man, if he's anything," Bill replied carelessly. "But, believe me," he added earnestly, "I'm hoping we stick together through this little muss if we've got to get into it, and I think we're going to sail in a couple of days. That's why we got this leave."

"Oh Bill!" Louise cried. "I wish I were going too," she added.

"It's all right, Little One," Bill said. "I'll have enough fun for the both of us, and you can keep the Governor happy."

Louis Beretti and Big Italy smoked opium with two girls that night. Louis was rather moody, and surprised his girl by asking suddenly:

"Why the hell don't you wash your neck?"

Her gold teeth annoyed him too. Finally, Big Italy asked:

"What's eating you tonight, Louis?"

"I'm a pain in the neck to myself," Louis said.

And he tried to imagine the girl he was with was Louise.

"If she'd smelled different I might've got away with it at that," he said to himself. "I gotta pull myself together."

CHAPTER VIII

Louis and Bill Pedersen stuck together after they got to France. The war was a background for their adventures. Neither of them took it seriously. Both of them could have become officers if they had wished. But both of them preferred to have a good time.

They hadn't been on French soil long before they both were assigned to an officers' training camp, and they hadn't been assigned to the officers' training camp long before they were assigned back to the heavy artillery again.

"This Lieutenant who's in charge of us is a wet smack," Bill said to Louis. "Let's requisition a hundred pounds of sugar for the bunch, and take a trip on our own."

"Why go to all that trouble, Bill?" Louis asked. "Why not steal the sugar?"

Bill, however, insisted on requisitioning the sugar.

"We might as well do things the right way once in a while," he said.

Then he and Louis departed with the 100 pound bag of sugar. They jumped on a freight train with it, and rolled off at the first town they came to.

"What's the name of this burg, I wonder?" Louis said.

"It doesn't make any difference," Bill replied. "Follow me."

They went into an estaminet, and Bill ordered a bottle of

brandy, an omelette with a dozen eggs in it, and two bottles of vin rouge. He paid the bill with sugar, which was a good deal more scarce than francs. There was no attempt to weigh it. He merely opened the bag and dipped it out.

"We oughta have some dames," Louis said.

"That's easy," Bill said. "As long as our sugar holds out we should be able to have all the dames we want."

"A couple have been walking by the door, giving us the eye," Louis said.

"Huh!" Bill told him, "your taste in females is bad, Louis. Anything with skirts on appeals to you. I'm fussy. Come along with me."

Louis shouldered the bag, and they walked along a lane until they came to a house behind a brick wall. Standing in the gate was a rather plump, pleasant-faced woman in her late twenties, with black hair, and big black eyes. She was smiling at them.

Bill doffed his overseas cap, and grinned.

"How do you do, Mademoiselle," he said in French. "We have here a large supply of sugar, which we are tired of carrying about, and would like very much to sit down in a quiet place, and rest."

"Monsieur does not look so fatigued," she replied, laughing. "And his friend carries the mountain of sugar as if it were straw. That is more sugar than I have seen in two years altogether."

"Perhaps we may come in?" Bill asked.

"But surely," was the reply. "One is glad to be hospitable to the brave Americans."

"We are not so brave," Bill confided, motioning to Louis to enter the gate. "But we are inclined to be generous with our sugar to beautiful ladies of France."

"Ooh, is it yours to part with, if you wish?" the lady in-

quired, pouting her lips in delighted surprise. "I would love to have some sugar, but I would not have brave soldiers get into difficulties over it."

"I am the sugar commissioner of the United States Army," Bill assured her gravely, "and this gentleman is my assistant. He assists me to carry the sugar."

"So I see," the lady said.

"And," Bill continued, after they were inside the gate, and when he was feeling relieved to be out of sight for a little while of curious M.P.'s, "I wish you would not call Louis and me brave. We much prefer to be recognized as discreet."

"Oh ho," said the lady, dropping long lashes over the large black eyes. "Perhaps if you would be so kind as to come into the house, my friend Antoinette and I will serve you with tea. I expect her any moment."

They went into the house, and the lady pulled a bell cord, to which responded a buxom wench with rosy cheeks, a little greasy, and ripe red lips under a suspicion of mustache. The lady ordered tea.

"What did the dame say to the other dame?" Louis asked.

"She ordered some tea for us, and another lady who is coming in a moment."

"I will help the dame get the tea," Louis said, and started after the receding plumpness of the maid.

"My assistant is going to inspect the kitchen," Bill explained gravely. "He also is a Kitchen Inspector in our army."

"I'll tote the bag for a while now," Bill said, about five hours later, as they started to leave the house.

"It's a lot lighter now," Louis said.

"Why didn't you wait for Mme. Demorest's friend?—she was most charming."

"Marie was right there," Louis said.

"By gosh!" Bill exclaimed. "Do you know I just remembered we didn't have any tea after all?"

"We got what we were after," Louis said. "And if we know what's good for us, we'll hook a freight, and get out of this burg before those nosy M.P.s get wise to us."

"You're on," Bill said. "Step on it."

Two days later, Louis got into a crap game in another town, the name of which they also didn't know, with a crowd of doughboys who had just been paid. Their pockets were tumorous with money. When Bill dragged Louis out of the game, Louis resembled an overstuffed mattress.

A few minutes later beside the road, they counted the spoils. They had a few francs short of four thousand dollars.

"Why in hell didn't you leave me alone?" Louis asked. "I'd 've got all the dough they had in a little while."

"I heard that before," Bill said. "I figured you had enough to take us to Paris. And it's to Paris we're going."

"Paris!" Louis said. "That's a dump I always wanted to see. But," he added, "we could've seen more of it if you'd left me alone."

Louis didn't tell Bill that the reason he would have liked to have been left in the game for a while was because the game was being played on a blanket, and no one was insisting on bouncing the dice against a wall or a backboard. Louis had spent many weary hours learning how to throw dice if he didn't have to roll 'em. And he couldn't have lost in that particular game. But he didn't tell Bill, because association with Bill had convinced him that Bill would have insisted on returning the money. Louis figured that Bill's early education had been neglected.

They had a good time in Paris. They lived in the Hotel Empire, and drank champagne, and had all the girls they

wanted. They were in the Casino de Paris one afternoon with more than a score of girls of easy virtue as their guests. The girls loved Bill and Louis: the Americans didn't care anything about money, and would pay for as many drinks as anyone wanted to drink, and would let the girls pick up the change. They admired Bill more, but they got on with Louis better. Bill was polite and rather aloof, but Louis grabbed them indifferently by their teats or their backsides, and even spanked one of them whom he caught with a hand in his pocket.

A Major and a Chaplain walked in while this party was in progress. They made one or two futile attempts to engage some of the girls in conversation, and then the Major said to Bill:

"These girls seem to think they belong to you. Would you mind parting with only two of them?"

"Not a bit, Major," Bill replied cheerfully. "You see, they think we are millionaires. We have been talking about our yacht, and we have told them we are sugar commissioners of the United States. Pick out whichever ones you want, and we'll fix it."

With alcoholic gravity, Bill and Louis helped the Major and the Chaplain select two girls. After the two girls were selected, Bill handed them each twenty dollars.

"Be good to these two men," he said in French, which neither the Major nor the Chaplain understood. "They are trusted agents of ours."

The Major and the Chaplain left with the girls, and Bill and Louis continued to buy drinks.

Two days later, Bill got into a game of Red Dog. After eight hours of play, with three thousand dollars in the pot, and only one card that could be turned to beat him, Bill tossed down his hand.

"Winners," he said.

The card was turned, and it beat him.

"That's that," Bill said, and he got up from the game, and went out with Louis. And after they got out they had countless drinks. And when they awoke they were in a hospital under arrest. They had been very drunk and very disorderly.

They were still suffering from the shakes when a French General marched in with his staff, and everyone in the ward was decorated with the Croix de Guerre. That's how Bill and Louis got their decorations.

"I'm going to keep mine," Louis said, "because it proves I was kissed once by a guy and didn't kill him."

"I ought to be ashamed of myself anyway," Bill said. "And this business certainly made me ashamed. After this, we've got to do some fighting, although it does seem such a waste of time."

"If I'd ever known the hell of a time a guy could get out of a war, I'd a been in one long ago," Louis said.

"We haven't been in one yet," Bill told him. "But we're going to be."

After some shuttling back and forth they landed at the front with the heavy artillery. They couldn't see any Germans, and no Germans except flyers could see them.

"I'm going to try to get transferred to the machine guns," Bill said one morning. "I'm still ashamed of myself, and this job of stuffing a big shell into a big boiler, and sending it at a target twenty miles away isn't my idea of a man's job."

"Duck, you and your man's job," Louis said. "Here comes a Dutchman."

A German plane dropped swiftly down from the sky, and skimming over the ground, peppered the crouching artillerymen with steel. Half a dozen of the missiles went through Bill.

Louis had some wine in his canteen, which he held to Bill's lips.

"Give me a cigarette, Louis," Bill said weakly.

Louis lighted the cigarette, and Bill said:

"This does me, Louis. And I don't like it so much. I wish I had done something worth while first."

Louis didn't say anything.

"You're a reg'lar feller, Louis," Bill continued. "I never knew a squarer chap. You take care of my things, and see the family only hear what's good about me."

Louis opened his mouth, and made the motions of saying, "That's all right, Bill," but no words came, which surprised him a good deal. He didn't feel any sense of shock. Everything was just the same as it had been—except that Bill was dying, and his voice was gone.

"There's a letter for the Governor, and one for Louise," Bill said. "If she ever needs a brother's help I told her she could depend on you. A cigarette?" he said more faintly, after a moment.

Louis lighted a cigarette. When he leaned over to put it between Bill's lips, Bill was dead.

Louis sat for uncounted minutes, not thinking of anything in particular. Finally he cleared his throat with a rough hawking sound, and said:

"Jesus Christ!"

He arose, and walked over to where some wounded were being given first aid.

"There's a guy dead over there," he said, stupidly. Several guys were dead around there.

"This is a bum war," he said after a moment. "The guys that got it up aint fighting in it."

CHAPTER IX

Louis Beretti didn't see any more Germans except prisoners during his time in France. He saw the company cook split the skull of one German prisoner, a Major and a fine looking chap, with a meat cleaver. The cook's brother had been killed earlier in the war.

"What the hell good did that do him?" Louis wanted to know.

This war was all over Louis' head. He could understand killing a guy for some good reason, but just to be knocking off regular fellers in heaps every day because they happened to be living in different parts of the world, didn't make sense to him.

He didn't have any more gay jaunts A.W.O.L. behind the lines, because Bill was gone, and Bill had been the inspiration for those adventures. He made money regularly shooting craps until all the guys he met were wise to the fact that the only way to shoot the cubes is to have them bounce against something, or at least to tumble fairly. Then he quit shooting craps.

When Louis got home he found $2,800 in the bank and Prohibition in effect. It didn't take him long to decide to go into the bootlegging business.

"It's respectable," he said to his mother, "and I want to be respectable."

"I am glad to hear you talk like that, Louis," Ma Beretti told him. "Pa was thinking of the same thing, and I should think you would like to go into the fruit and soda business with your father, only you could fix up a place to sell the drinks—if you could do it without getting into trouble."

"Oh," Louis said, "the cops are all right. Some of 'em sell it, and I've never seen one of 'em yet that don't drink it. Don't worry, Ma, I never would get you or Pa into any trouble."

Louis went around to see Big Italy, who had gotten back from the war before Louis, and was out on bail on a junk running charge. He had been caught running white goods in from Canada.

"I decided to be a business man, Italy," said Louis.

"That's fine," Big Italy replied with the lightening of his features which he reserved for Louis. "You got a clean record, and your mother is a fine woman. What business?"

"I thought I'd put a little booze in the soda fountain," Louis said. "The old man has got himself a store now, and the back room should be a good place to start."

"Where you going to get the booze?" Big Italy asked.

"Well," Louis explained, "I thought it would be foolish to buy it if I could steal it, but I'm through with robbing. I'm just going to be a business man."

"There's a load I got down in the XY warehouse," Big Italy said. "I wouldn't be surprised I could get you a barrel. I guess you'd rather pay me for it than a stranger."

"I was thinking something like that," Louis said.

Louis paid Big Italy $800 for a barrel of whiskey the next day. It was 110 proof, but he cut it with alcohol and water and coloring until it was 80 proof, which is 40 per cent. alcohol, and opened business with whiskey at 50 cents an ounce.

His bar was a packing case, and an old table, and a leaky old sink in the corner. The sink also was the wash room.

He only had been in business two days when Detective O'Connor walked into the fruit store, and right through it to the rear, where he knocked on the door, which Louis kept barred.

"What do you want?" Louis asked through a peephole.

"Let me in, Louis," O'Connor said. "I haven't seen you since you got back from the battles, and the Paris sector, and I would like to look you over. And don't empty that bottle of booze you've got in your pocket down the sink either, because I want a drink too. I aint interested in anything but dope."

Louis opened the door.

"I shouldn't take any chances with you, you bastard," Louis said. "And I'd like to put a Micky Finn in your drink, but I don't sell junk any more."

"No hard feelin's, Louis," O'Connor responded. "You are a tough baby to handle, Louis, and I don't mind saying I'm glad you're off the racket."

Louis took a pint bottle from a hip pocket—one hip was for Scotch, and one hip was for Rye—and poured a drink in a thick bottomed glass. All the glasses made for Prohibition use had thick bottoms, to make small drinks look bigger.

"If you'll leave your gun and your 'jack up here, I'd like to go down cellar with you for a few minutes, you bastard," Louis said in conversational tones. "I would like to have you alone on a desert island for a few minutes."

"Look, Louis," O'Connor said, taking a preliminary taste of the fluid in his glass. "As long as you are in business right and proper I got nothing against you. But you know yourself that you were in a pretty lousy business peddlin' coke."

"I didn't quite get what I was doing myself," Louis admitted. "I guess it was the only thing I ever did that I am kind of sorry for. I hope to Christ that everyone forgets I ever had

anything to do with it. Of course, I like to smoke a pill once in a while myself, but I wouldn't have anything to do with peddling it any more. I feel sorry for those junkies."

"I'm glad you see it that way, Louis," O'Connor said, pushing his glass over the top of the packing case towards his host. "Give me another shot of the varnish, Louis. It aint so bad at that, although you'll never take a prize as a rectifier."

"I don't mind you coming in here and getting a drink once in a while, O'Connor, but don't think you can give any parties here, because you can't," Louis told him, filling the glass two-thirds full. "I'm running a quiet business with my old man, and I aint going to have any cops hanging around here entertaining their friends."

"Well," O'Connor said, "I'm glad you're in a good straight business, Louis, although I wouldn't be surprised if I could guess that this whiskey came out of a warehouse by the back door, or the roof. But some of the other cops'll make trouble for you, maybe."

"I'm pretty well fixed," Louis replied. "The Inspector was around yesterday, and looked the place over and there wasn't anything for him to make any cracks about: and the Captain is a good feller, and Tim and Jack and Bill on the beat here are O.K. All they all got to do is leave me alone."

"I'll put in a good word for you, Louis, and so will Wheeler," O'Connor said. "He'll probably be coming around to see you, himself."

"He needn't bother, especially," Louis said. "I ain't anxious to have any of you guys in this place. My customers don't like the looks or the smell of cops and neither do I. Any of you is likely to get a Micky Finn any day."

"Well so long, Louis."

"So long, O'Connor, and I hope you choke to death on a fish bone."

The Daily Star building was just around the corner from the fruit store, and Louis' first customers were from the mail room. Then the reporters and editors began to slip in for drinks too. They all liked Louis.

Mack Sloan, the city editor of The Planet, was a hard drinker. So was Charlie Sullivan, whose sport column was syndicated and printed in many cities; and Eddie Briggs, whose humorous and allegedly philosophical writings were equally widely circulated.

They formed the nucleus of a group which soon made a downtown headquarters of Louis' back room. When Louis closed up around 10 or 11 o'clock, they would move up a few blocks to Jack Gibbs's place.

Jack was a tough guy all right, and he was a power among the drivers of newspaper wagons, many of whom fought in preliminary bouts in the different boxing clubs in the city, including old Madison Square Garden. To make the trip up to Jack's place, more often than not, the friendly and rather well-oiled spirits rode in a cab driven by Joe Bergman. Joe was a pickpocket really, but he and his brother Freddy drove a taxicab when they weren't working at their trade, which they did mostly on fight nights.

It was a peculiar taxicab, in that it had a wonderful engine under its rather nondescript hood, and could pick up like a scared deer, and travel faster than most cars which looked as if they had been built for speed. If you knew where to look you could find several bullet holes in that taxicab. It was a get-away car, and it always got away.

The meter started at twenty cents, and clocked up twenty cents every third of a mile, which made it the type of cab that commonly is referred to in New York as a "gyp" cab. But when Joe was driving friends, and the newspaper men all were friends, the clock didn't bother him or them.

He'd drive them all night, and drink a little with them, and laugh with them, and when settling up time came in the morning, he would say:

"Gosh! I hate to take anything from you fellers. I had more fun than you did. But if you want to give me five dollars for the gas, I suppose it'll make me a better business man."

One night Joe drove the bunch up to Jack Gibbs's. With them that night was a reporter for The Star, a chap that had come out of Yale with honors, and who had some money of his own, and who wrote a good story once in a while, but did remarkable drinking all of the time. His name was Henry Still, and everyone called him Hank.

When the bunch landed at Jack's, Jack was sitting at a table in the back. He said to Eddie Briggs:

"Eddie, you guys had better blow tonight. There's a guy lookin' for me, and if he comes in here and finds me I'm going to give him some of this," and he showed them a revolver.

Everybody left except Hank. He stayed despite their urging. He bought a drink for Jack and himself, and started to try to persuade Jack that he shouldn't shoot anybody. While they were on their fifth drink, and Hank was figuring what a great persuader he had turned out to be, the door opened, and a man walked in—a fat chap of about thirty with pasty cheeks, and a broken nose.

Jack pointed his revolver and pulled the trigger. "Wham!" went the revolver, and the fat man put his hands to his belly and staggered.

Hank was all sympathy. He got to his feet with difficulty, because he was more than ordinarily tight, and helped the fat man who was holding on to his stomach with both hands, to the door.

"You had better not stay here," he said to the fat man. "Jack is unreasonable tonight, and he might shoot you again."

"He got me right in the guts," replied the fat man, wearily.

"You'll be all right in the morning," Hank said. "Just go home now and go to bed," and he let the fat man, still holding his belly, stagger through the door.

Then he went back to the table, and picked up the revolver which was lying in front of Jack.

"We'd better hide this now," he said. "You shouldn't have shot that poor chap in the stomach."

Tony, the bartender, had come from behind his imitation mahogany bar. He swung a right with the intention of hitting Hank in the jaw but hit him in the nose instead, breaking that organ, and releasing a crimson flood.

Another chap who had been sitting at another table, had arisen when the shot was fired, and had stood silently watching Hank escort the wounded man to the door, and then walk back and pick up the revolver. Now he swung a chair high and brought it down with a crash on Hank's head.

Hank pitched to the floor and Tony and two or three men had just given him the boot once, and the chair wielder had raised his shattered weapon once more, when there was the sound of a fist impacting on flesh, the thud of a falling body, and Louis Beretti walked in.

"What the hell!" said Louis Beretti.

He knocked Tony kicking before he had time to do any more than look surprised. He kicked the table over on Jack, and then with ferocious vigor swung two blows in succession at the other two men, who went to the floor.

Bending over, he picked up Hank, slung him across his shoulder, and lugged him out through a long narrow hall, where the fat man was sitting down still holding on to his stomach, out of the street door, where two more of Jack's satellites were standing uneasily, and across the sidewalk to Joe Bergman's taxi.

On the way uptown, Louis went through Hank's pockets, and found his keys. At the apartment in 111th street near Riverside Drive where Hank lived with his widowed mother and sister, Isabelle, Louis opened the door with one of the keys, and deposited Hank inside on the floor.

Then he and Joe drove down a few blocks and over West to a speakeasy in Amsterdam Avenue, where Louis called the Stills' apartment on the telephone.

"Hank got in a little fight with some fellers," he said over the telephone to Isabelle, who answered, "and you'll find him downstairs in the lobby. You better get a doctor and get him patched up right away, and don't be scared because he's all blood. He's all right."

"Who is this?" Isabelle asked, excitedly.

"This is the taxi driver that took him home," Louis said. "I got his name and address out of his card case."

"Ma is always giving me hell for letting Hank and a couple or other of those newspaper guys get drunk in our place," Louis Beretti told Joe on the way downtown. "I tell her if they didn't get drunk there they'd be gettin' drunk some other place, but she can't see it. And she was after me about Hank tonight. If I hadn't gone and got him, she'd 'a' blamed me because he got murdered. And now I've gone and butted into another guy's game for the first time in my life."

"That bunch of bastards don't count anyway," said Joe philosophically.

"I'd get the mob up and clean 'em out for a nickel," Louis said. "They're such God damned fatheads, they make me sick."

Next day the body of the fat man was picked up where it had been tossed over the fence guarding a site of a new office building in lower Broadway. Two days after that Jack Gibbs was arrested on a charge of murder.

Eddie Briggs called on Hank that afternoon. Hank's mother said he was out on the Drive getting his first breath of fresh air since the accident.

"His nose was broken, and he was badly bruised," said Mrs. Still, a gentle-voiced lady, who conveyed the impression of a kindly and unsophisticated small town dweller temporarily visiting a large city, and rather astonished by the goings-on. "I don't know yet how the poor boy got home. He was attacked while he was on a newspaper assignment in a bad section of the city."

Eddie did not go to Riverside Drive. He went right to King's on Broadway, which was the handiest place that sold liquor. And there he found Hank, with a Scotch highball in front of him.

"Hello, Eddie," said Hank. "How're they rollin'? Have a drink."

"How'd you get bunged up, Hank?" Eddie asked. "I just heard about it."

"I was down in Jack's place," Hank said. "But don't tell anyone how I got it, if I tell you, will you? Jack said he was going to shoot a feller. And I was persuading him not to, and I thought I had succeeded, when a fat feller came in and Jack shot him in the stomach. I helped the fat feller out, and I was talking about hiding the revolver for Jack because he was drunk and didn't know what he was doing, when someone hit me, and I didn't know any more. I don't even remember getting home. I must be some homing pigeon."

"Ye-ah," said Eddie. "And what do you think happened to the fat feller?"

"He must have a sorer stomach than I got nose," replied Hank, grinning a battered grin, and feeling tenderly of his plastered nose and bandaged face. "But I got him out all right."

"You damned fool," Eddie said. "Didn't you know you were in on a murder? The fat guy's body was found in a vacant lot where they dumped it. And Jack's down in the Tombs right now charged with killing him."

"For God's sake," Hank said. "I ought to go right down and see him."

"Well, I'll be God damned," Eddie exclaimed. "You're even a bigger horse's backside than I ever could have believed. You're an accessory before and after a murder right now, and how the hell you ever didn't get bumped off yourself I don't know. Can't you get it through your thick head that you were in on a murder, and that you're one of the luckiest gents in the world right now to be sitting here drinking highballs? As a matter of fact you ought to be right down on your knees thanking God instead of sitting here lapping up bum hooch."

Eddie lapped up the rest of his own bum hooch, and ordered two more of the same.

"Does Jack know your name?" he asked.

"No," Hank said. "He always just called me, 'Kid,' and 'Old Tomater.' He knows me if he sees me, though."

"Well, he's forgotten you by this time, except as a guy he missed fire on murdering or having murdered," Eddie said. "And it's a good thing for you."

He took a long drink.

"What I can't understand is how in the name of all that's holy you ever got out of that and got home?" he said finally.

"Oh, I gotta natural instinct for getting home," Hank said. "I always do. Let's get a cab and go down to Louis'. I'm feeling better."

Down at Louis', Louis said:

"Hello, Eddie; hello Hank, you Protestant bastard. What did you do, bump into a door in the dark, or something?"

"I got into a little fight, Louis. Have a drink, will you?"

"We'll have a little drink or two," Louis said. "But don't have too many because the old lady is always after me about getting you drunk. God damn it," Louis added as he finished pouring three drinks, "you don't know what a pest you are to me Hank. Here's hoping you slip on a banana peel and break your neck."

As they stood, slightly wavering, waiting for a taxicab to take them home that night Hank said to Eddie:

"Louis is a good feller, Eddie, but he hasn't any heart."

"Like Jack Gibbs," said Eddie.

CHAPTER X

Ma Beretti was not as full of vigor as she had been formerly. She was fatter than ever; in fact, she was fat in such a strange way that it had worried her secretly for some time. She was bloated. And her legs were swollen. Only her lined face was not fat. Her cheeks were sunken, and her dark eyes, under which were dark pouches, were very bright.

Pa Beretti, who already owned two tenement houses around in Mulberry street, had bought a lot up in Westchester. It was a good lot in a pretty development, and he was planning to build the house that he and Ma had been dreaming about together for years. He was so engrossed in his plans, and so happy that he finally was going to bestow a castle on the only Queen he ever had known, that he was rather snappish with her as well as the rest of the family. She looked the same to him as she had when he first saw her as a rosy cheeked girl, with good hips, plump, firm breasts, black curling hair—and big, shining, lovely black eyes.

He hadn't been much of a man himself, so far as stature went in those days. But he had a great spirit, and he was a tremendous worker. When he wanted anything he went after it. And he worked for Ma, when the other gallants were singing; and although it hurt him mightily to do it, he even worked nights for her.

He never told anyone about it—and Ma never told anyone about it either—but in those times Pa had sent her little poems every day, and flowers, when he could get them. And he told her why he was working. There was nothing the matter with Pa's tongue when he was talking to Ma, when they were young. He loved Ma, and he always told her about it at every opportunity.

Persons who didn't know about the poetry, and who never had had an opportunity to hear Pa talk when he was under the triple inspiration of wine, the moon through the tree tops, and Ma's eyes, said they never could understand how such a little chap as Pa had gotten away with such a splendid maid as Ma. But Pa had, and Ma always was glad of it, although now and then when she was talking Turkey to Pa she let on that she might have done better.

The night Pa came home with the contract for the new house in Westchester he was so excited that he didn't see the sadness in Ma's eyes. The girls finally had persuaded her to see a doctor; and she knew she had sugar and albumen, and that the time that she was going to spend with Pa and the rest of her family was limited.

The doctor, whom she called a Professor, had told her that if she dieted very carefully she might prolong her life; but everything that poor Ma Beretti thought was worth eating was barred, and everything that she didn't think was fit for animals was on the diet.

"Eat plenty of butter and sugar and bread and red meat, and drink soberly of wine, and you'll be happy and healthy forever," might have been Ma's motto. She expressed that idea many times if not in those exact words, at least to that general effect.

So Ma looked at the plans through a film, and when she asked how much the house was going to cost and Pa told her

it was going to cost $25,000, she didn't have energy enough to give him even a chiding word, let alone a typical, ten thousand word Ma Beretti lecture on extravagance, with the Poor House to wind up with in grand peroration.

That gave Pa a shock. He looked at Ma for the first time in weeks to really see her, and he dropped the plans, and put his thin arms around her big shoulders, and pulled her black head, streaked with white now, over on his bony chest, and petted her back with a gnarled hand, and said in Italian:

"What is the matter my beautiful one? Aren't you feeling well?"

And Ma Beretti, who had fought the world all her life, and who never had been mothered since she was a baby, and then only until the next one came a year later, and who had been acting as a foster, or real mother from the time she was about six, laid her cheek against Pa's cheek, and let silent tears leak down her weather beaten cheeks.

"The doctor says I've got to be more careful," she said finally.

"Aff! Those doctors!" Pa Beretti said impatiently, with a wide gesture of his hands, ending with a thump of one of them on the turkey-red table cloth of the Beretti dining room. "You have no business to work any more with the girls grown up, and the boys grown up. And anyhow in this house I am building, you will have a servant to work for you. You will be just like a great lady, and do nothing from morning until night. And you will see that you will feel good again in the country."

"I couldn't be happy if I wasn't working," Ma complained. "I've got to work. If my hands are not busy I feel that I am committing a sin."

"Well, I can't feel very happy if I'm loafing myself," Pa Beretti admitted. "But you can work in this house, and right here till you get in this new house only so much as makes you

feel happy. You don't have to get up at 4:30 in the morning any more to get my breakfast, and you don't have to cook all the meals, and work in the store between times, and make dresses for the girls, and then sit up waiting for Louis to come home—not to mention going over to Peter's house to take care of his babies when they are sick. You and I have raised the children, and now we can sit back and let them work."

"If Louis will only stick to honest business," Ma said. "And sometimes I wonder if we are right to think that selling whiskey is honest business when the Government says it isn't."

"Pah!" said Pa Beretti through his nose. "This Prohibition isn't anything but graft for the rich. You know that. The Judges all drink and you know it, because Louis sells it to some of them. The lawyers drink, and the Congressmen drink, and the policemen drink. You can see that in our own place. Everybody drinks. It is the American custom to drink whiskey and drink too much of it. That is not our fault. If they would drink good wine and be satisfied it would be all right.

"The best people in the country drink wine and beer and whiskey and brandy. And if it is all right for them to drink it, it is all right for us to sell it to them. There is no difference so far as I can see between the man that buys it and the man that sells it, except that the man that sells it may have more sense than the man who buys it.

"You are not ashamed before God that we sell drinks that are pure, and so you should not be ashamed before crooked politicians and stupid cranks. God made the world and the wine possible, not the cranks and the Congressmen."

"Well, sometimes I wonder if Louis really is doing right. The police have come to look in the place already, and they do arrest people for being in the business."

"The police come in to drink more than they do to arrest," Pa said. "And it is no more disgrace to be arrested for selling

a glass of pure whiskey the way I look at it, than it is to be arrested for smiling on Sunday, and they tell me that is a law that these same cranks had once somewhere. I am told, but I don't believe it, that there are places where it is against the law to sell cigarettes in the United States. It is a funny country we are in—the best country in the world, but very queer because of the laws that no one that is real pays any attention to."

"But I don't like to see those men getting drunk while we are getting money for it," Ma Beretti persisted.

"I would suggest," Pa said, having forgotten entirely that he had been worried about Ma's health, "that you just figure out if God would be satisfied with what we are doing in this business."

"He turned the water into wine," added Ma, "and the wine is His Blood."

"Well, let's go to bed, Ma," said Pa Beretti. "And you can stay in bed as long as you want in the morning. Don't you like that?"

"I think Louis has been in bad company, but that is because we were poor," Ma said as they were getting undressed. "We couldn't live in any better neighborhood. But he is a good boy —only he doesn't like to work hard like you and me."

"Maybe we had used up all the work spirit and there wasn't any left for Louis," Pa said, in one of his rare attempts at a joke.

"Where is Ma?" Mack Sloan asked a week or so later. "I haven't seen her lately."

"I guess the old lady hasn't very long to live," Louis said unemotionally, pouring the last of some rye from a pint bottle. "And I don't know what the old man'll do after she's gone. I don't think he knows how sick she is, but I saw the doctor

myself, and I had my friend Doc Maynard tell me the name of another Doc to look at her. This Doc is a big guy up on Park Avenue. His name is Grayke."

"One of the best diagnosticians in the world," Sloan said.

"Well, Dr. Grayke told me she wouldn't live long. She has to be tapped now. They draw the water out of her. She gets all swelled up like a balloon. And she feels pretty tired."

"If there is anything we could do, Louis," Charlie Sullivan said. "You know how fond we are of Pa and Ma, and especially of Ma."

"There's nothin' anyone can do," Louis replied surlily. "Only it makes me feel kind of sick myself to see her still trying to work. The old man's so busy building the new house out in the country that he hasn't time to really think. He figures that when Ma moves into that house, with electric wash tubs, and electric refrigerator, and oil furnace, and electric piano, and a garage out back and everything that she is going to get well. He can't realize she has anything more than a headache."

"Here are a couple of seats for the fights tonight," Charlie Sullivan said.

"Thanks," Louis said. "Those should be damned good fights, but right now I feel more like getting like Eddie is there. He's worth a dime a dozen right now, but he's happy because he don't know anything."

They looked at Eddie Briggs, who was sitting dumbly on an upturned peach basket. Eddie's mouth was dropped open and his eyes were half closed, and he was breathing hard. He was unshaven, and his clothes were untidy; his soft collar was dirty.

Eddie was on one of his hard drinking periods, but they all knew he was writing his daily column right along, and doing his Sunday stuff besides. They got like that—the old timers

in the writing business. Give one of 'em a typewriter and he could do his job, nine times out of ten, and no one would know the difference.

Only it was a good plan always to be sure that there was a piece of paper in the machine when he began to write. There was the case of Bill O'Brien, for instance. Bill had written a whole big story one night when he had a cargo of Scotch aboard, but without any paper in his typewriter.

"Eddie is feeling pretty low," Louis explained to Mack Sloan and Charlie Sullivan, pouring them drinks on the house in honor of the fight tickets.

"You know Eddie always was a guy that thought he could commit a murder or rob somebody without leaving any clues. He used to be a detective reporter and he thought he was a smart guy. Anytime a dumbbell killed somebody and got caught, Eddie would deliver a lecture on how all it took was brains to cover up your tracks. He said all that prevented him from being a good crook was the fact that he had no leanings that way. He had the brains but not the ambition.

"Well, Eddie's frau has just been on a trip to Europe. She got back last Monday. Eddie had been having a bunch of girls up at his apartment all the time she was away, among them a big, red headed dame that he often got drinks for out at the soda fountain.

"Well, when his frau was coming back Eddie got scientific as hell. He got in a strange woman to clean the apartment first. And then he got the janitor and his wife to clean it. And then he called back the maid who worked for them regular and who he had given a vacation along with his frau, and she cleaned it. And in between times Eddie went over it the best he could for himself.

"After his wife came home he was sure there weren't any

loose hairpins, or ribbons, or stockings, or stray handkerchiefs that were going to get him into trouble.

"Next day after she blew in he was in the office writing his column when the telephone bell rang. It was his frau. She told him to come home. He said:

" 'Why, darling I am very busy writing my column right now. Can't you tell me what it is over the telephone, or can't it wait for an hour or two when my column will be done?'

"And the frau said, 'Don't darling me, you bastard. Get in a taxicab and come straight home.'

"So, Eddie got in a taxi and went home, and when he opened the door and went in, his frau pointed to a pile of red hair on a newspaper she had laid out on the floor. His frau's a brunette.

" 'I got that out of the vacuum cleaner,' she said. 'How do you explain that?'

"Eddie looked at the red hair, and at the vacuum cleaner and at his frau, and then he said:

" 'Well, I guess I don't know very much about machinery,' and he went out and got in another taxicab and came right down here. And there he is sitting over there on the peach basket. Maybe he's thinking how lucky it was that he didn't go in for a criminal career, with all the science that he's got."

Sounds of a commotion outside in the store attracted Louis' attention. He looked through the peep-hole.

"Drink those drinks," he said. "Here's some cops." At the same time he upturned his two pint bottles in the sink. The others quickly tossed off what remained of their potions, and rinsed the containers under the faucet. The whole procedure only took a couple of seconds, but before they were finished, there were heavy knocks on the door.

"Wait a minute," Louis said. "What's your rush?" and he opened the door. Two policemen in plain clothes walked in.

"For Christ's sake!" Louis exclaimed. "You don't have to knock a guy down when he's opening the door for you. I haven't anything here. Take a good look."

The policemen, four of them, looked at the glasses on the shelf beside the sink and on the shelf over the sink, and one of them said, as he picked one of them up and sniffed at it:

"I suppose you serve soda in these."

"That's our medicine department," Louis said. "If a customer gets sick from drinking too many orangeades, we give him some baking soda in one of those."

"What's this guy been doing, drinking?" a policeman asked, pointing to Eddie Briggs.

"Why don't you ask him?" Louis responded. "I ain't responsible for what my customers do before they come in here."

"Hey!" said the policeman, shaking Eddie Briggs. "What are you doing in here?"

Eddie rolled a pair of fishy eyes up at his interrogator and said:

"I want a roll of your best chicken wire," and he started to get up, and pitched over on the floor, and went to sleep, and no one paid any more attention to him for a few minutes, while the policemen sounded the walls, and moved boxes and barrels, and went down cellar. After hammering and swearing around for fifteen or twenty minutes they went out.

"You better be careful," one of them said as they went out.

"I am," said Louis.

And as soon as they were gone, he took his two pint bottles, and went out through the fruit store and into the apartment next door, where his father and mother and Rosa were living until the house in the country would be finished. And within two minutes he was back with both bottles filled.

"But I'm not going to do it this way much longer," Louis said. "I'm going to put in a good bar here. We'll leave the

store in front, but I'm going to fix this place up right. They don't do anything with the liquor cases unless a sale is proved. Possession don't mean anything at all much. And I figure I can do a better business if I have a decent place instead of this dump."

Rosa Beretti, who was the only sister who hadn't been married, and who worked in the store with Peter and his wife, came to the door, and called Louis to the peep-hole:

"It's a telephone," Louis said. "I'll be right back."

Mack Sloan and Charlie Sullivan went out with Louis, after propping Eddie Briggs up on his peach basket again. They passed Bill O'Brien coming in for what he called his "first today—with this hand." Bill never drank any other kind of drinks, except firsts.

When Louis returned from the telephone, he said:

"Hello, Bill."

"Hello, Louis," Bill said.

Louis was very fond of Bill in his way. Bill was a crack newspaper man who wasn't interested in anything else but doing the job in hand. He was one of the safest repositories for secrets in town. He was almost, if not quite, as safe as Louis himself. Bill probably knew more about Louis' life with the "mob" than anyone else, and he didn't know much more than some of the detectives. Only he knew it from Louis himself.

"Could I go in and say 'Hello' to Ma?" Bill asked.

"Sure, Bill," Louis said, with a real smile. "The old lady would be glad to see you. I'll give you a drink of that 112 proof stuff that was stolen out of the warehouse the other night."

They went out through the store.

"Hello, Rosa," Bill said pleasantly. She smiled and said, "Hello, Mr. O'Brien. Mother will be glad to see you."

"I'll be right back if anyone comes," said Louis, pushing his sister carelessly aside.

Louis and Bill turned down a narrow hall, and entered a dining room. The table was covered with a red table cloth. There was a sideboard of quartered oak with wax apples and bananas and oranges in a bowl. Ma Beretti in a Mother Hubbard, was sitting in a rocker. Her sparse white-streaked hair was down, and her obese figure filled the rocker to overflowing.

"How are you Mr. O'Brien?" she asked. "I am sorry I can't get up, but I am not feeling very strong, and my head is dizzy."

Ma had a bag of peas at one side of her and a pan perched uneasily on her abdomen. She went ahead shelling the peas.

"Perhaps Mr. O'Brien will have a glass of wine," she said.

Louis grinned and winked at Bill. Bill said:

"That's just what I will have, Ma. I don't think there is anything so good as the wine when it is made right, and I know Pa Beretti makes it right. That's all I would drink if I could get it. Wine like that is a medicine. Whiskey is poison unless you take a little of it like medicine."

Ma Beretti looked up happily, dropping some peas back in the bag.

"I am so glad to hear you say it, Mr. O'Brien," she said in her heavily accented English. "Wine and beer could hurt no one. Papa always drinks a big bottle of wine every day for his dinner, and every day for his supper, and after he takes a nap he goes back to work and works harder than ever. There is nothing like wine to keep the heart young and to make good blood in your body. But the whiskey is terrible. I have worried about the way you were drinking it."

Louis got out a big bottle of wine, and he poured two glasses

full, and just put a drop in a third glass which he handed to his mother.

"Here's luck," Louis said.

"May I wish you a speedy recovery, Mrs. Beretti," Bill said, bowing gallantly and raising his glass. "It always did me good to see you in the store."

Ma shook her head and sighed.

"I don't think I'll be in the store again," she told him. "Pa is building a fine home in Westchester with everything electric, and he says I must live in the country now and rest. But I don't feel as if I will live long. I hope you will not drink whiskey any more, Mr. O'Brien: it hurts me that we sell it when you and the other nice gentlemen who come in to see Louis drink too much of it. I think how your mothers or your wives would feel. I know how I would have felt if my husband had done like that."

"I am off the whiskey," Bill O'Brien said, bowing again, and setting down his empty glass. "And I hope I see you feeling better the next time, Mrs. Beretti. I always thought Pa was lucky to get such a beautiful girl as you were."

Ma made a weary motion of her head, but smiled in spite of herself.

"Don't talk that way to an old woman, Mr. O'Brien," she said. "And you leave the whiskey alone."

"You can be sure of that," Bill replied, backing out of the room, and making a last little bow.

"Here's some of that 112 proof stuff," said Louis, when they were again in the back room.

"And here's the first today—with this hand," added Bill O'Brien. "I'm certainly glad to wash the taste of that grape juice out of my mouth. How're things going anyway, Louis?"

"Well," Louis said, "you may hear of a murder tomorrow. You write about a lot of 'em."

"I'll keep my ears open, Louis," Bill told him. "Give me another drink."

"I'll have a few myself, I guess," Louis said. "Here's luck to both of us, and bad luck to some other guys I know."

CHAPTER XI

Louis Beretti hadn't been fooling when he told Bill O'Brien that he might hear of a murder the next day. Although Louis had quit robbing, he hadn't deserted his old friends, nor had he left the club. He still was a regular in the old quarters.

The night before he had been in the club with Big Italy, Red McLaurin, Tommy Welch, Kid Quick, and Jack Quinn, who formed the nucleus of the organization. Red McLaurin had come in late. He was a great hand for the dames.

"Red is always talkin' to those dames of his," Tommy Welch said after Red arrived.

"Aw shut up," Red said. "I don't tell 'em nothin' except how wonderful they are. An' they like that."

"He used to tell the teachers in school everything he knew," Jack Quinn observed. "I always thought maybe that black-haired Irish dame that was in the Sixth Grade maybe put the cops wise to where Cassidy was hidin' in the cellar, on account of Red shootin' off his face to her. He'll tell a dame everything if he's stuck on her."

Big Italy turned his bright eyes thoughtfully upon Red McLaurin, who was nervously fingering a whiskey glass. Big Italy was smoking a cigar that looked too large for his thin face, and when he removed it momentarily from his tightlipped mouth, a big diamond flashed on the little finger of his left hand.

Big Italy was expecting to do a bit in Atlanta for getting caught while transporting a load of junk across the border from Canada, and he had been wondering how the Federal Narcotic Squad had gotten wise to him. Big Italy had been looking thoughtfully at Red McLaurin for many years. He certainly did talk a lot to the dames.

Louis Beretti probably was the best friend Red had. He had persuaded Big Italy on many occasions through the years that Red was on the level, and keeping his nose clean. No one except Louis perhaps knew what it had meant for him to champion Red. Big Italy never acted in haste, but he was a man who followed his intuitions and his information. Unlike the courts, he didn't need any legal evidence to decide who was guilty and who was innocent.

He had just heard that afternoon that a girl whom Red had been sweet on was a cousin of Sandy McNish, head of the Narcotic Squad, and he had about made up his mind once and for all about Red.

Checking back in his mind, it didn't seem so odd to him that the police had had special information about the truck load of silk that Kid Quick and Fatty Cook had stolen, and for which they had been arrested and tried. The information against them had been good, but their lawyer and their alibi had been better. That had happened when Red was going with the same girl as Cray of the Inspector's Staff. It didn't look so good.

"No, you can't keep your nose clean, Red," Big Italy said finally. "And you're going to get yours. So watch out."

Red paled through his freckles, and the tan that had come from his job as truck driver. He started nervously and looked at Louis. But the matter now was out of Louis' hands. He was fond of Red, liked him better than anyone outside of his family, except Big Italy, of course. But now it was between

Big Italy and Red. Red could move away, and move away fast, or he could shoot Big Italy right there and then, or later if he was especially lucky, or he could get bumped off himself. Someone was going to get his now.

Big Italy put the cigar back in his mouth, but did not take his eyes from Red.

"Aw Italy," Red said, "what's eatin' you tonight? I aint done anything. I always been on the level with all you guys ever since we were kids."

Louis Beretti continued to contemplate the few drops of whiskey in the bottom of his glass. He tilted the glass from side to side, apparently fascinated by the oil which remained to run more slowly to the bottom after the rest of the liquid had flowed away. He had been afraid of this for years, and he confessed to himself that Red had earned what was coming to him.

"But he's such a nice guy—except for the dames," Louis was thinking. "He's got to tell the skirts everything. For Christ's sake—but what the hell! There was nothing a feller could do about it."

He looked at Red then with a cold stare in his dark brown eyes, and a lack of expression on his face that affected Red more than anything even that Big Italy had said. Red glanced around, and everyone was looking at him strangely, he thought.

"I'll get out till you're all feeling better," he said trying to smile.

He was moving toward the door when it opened and Freddy South, lately of Chicago, and two of his lieutenants walked in.

"Hello," said Freddy. "Hello Italy, hello Louis, hello Kid. How's tricks?"

No one said anything for a minute. Big Italy broke the silence to say:

"All right."

This looked bad. Freddy South was a big gunman in Chicago, where he had gone from New York a couple of years before. He was particularly interested in protecting laundries with his gang. He also was a bootlegger's guard, and a hijacker of sorts. He was known to have killed a dozen men, and the two thugs with him weren't far behind their leader in the trade of murder.

You hustle a feller about in the particular stratum of society in which the persons in that room moved, and if the feller takes the hustling, you've got him licked. If he doesn't take the hustling, then you've got to find out who's the better man.

Louis didn't have to ask Big Italy if Big Italy were going to take anything; and Big Italy didn't have to ask Louis what he was going to do either.

"What do you want?" Big Italy said, taking the cigar out of his mouth, so that the diamond on his little finger flashed its prettiest.

"We want a cut in your crap game—that's all," Freddy South told him. "You can't run the crap game without giving us our bit."

The crap game was one of the regular sources of revenue to the club. It helped pay the rent, and it went for rackets, and it helped pay the expenses of the club baseball team on which both Big Italy and Louis played. They played regularly at Sing Sing with the Mutual Welfare League team, which gave them a chance to hobnob with old friends.

Freddy pushed against Big Italy as he spoke, and Big Italy hit him, and one of Freddy's lieutenants knocked Big Italy unconscious with a chair. Then Louis Beretti went into action. He knocked out the three of them. The others threw the three out in the street.

Big Italy had a big gash which ran from where you could see

it on his forehead over his left eye back into the hair where you couldn't see it. After he had been patched up, Big Italy said to Louis:

"They'll be back tomorrow."

"Sure," Louis said.

"Well, this hasn't anything to do with you, Louis," Big Italy said. "You keep out of this. You got a clean record, and your mother is sick, and your family is a nice family. You let me handle this."

"I'll be here," said Louis.

That was why, after having a large number of drinks with Bill O'Brien, Louis went around to the club, all steamed up.

"You don't have to bother, Louis, if Freddy South comes around," said Big Italy, whose strange, bright eyes were burning with alcohol, and suppressed ferocity. But his voice was just as quiet and level as it ever was. And he handled his cigar so that no one could help seeing his diamond. There was a long ash on the cigar, when Freddy South and his two aides walked in.

"Hello, Italy; hello Louis; how's tricks?" said Freddy with what was intended to be a genial smile but what succeeded in being a frightful grimace.

Louis didn't say anything, but his face was distorted into what he thought was a grin, showing all his teeth. His eyes were burning black under his tense brows.

"What do you guys want?" Big Italy said evenly, as he laid his cigar carefully down on an ash tray on the table, and slowly rose to his feet.

"We don't want anything except to be friendly, and to get our cut of the game," Freddy said. "We came here——"

"Here it is, you bastards! Here's your cut."

With the words, Big Italy turned loose with two army auto-

matic pistols, one in each hand. The two lieutenants sank to the floor instantly. Freddy South turned and ran.

Louis grabbed one of the automatics from Big Italy, and ran after Freddy. They went down one street and up another. The streets were well sprinkled with their usual collection of humanity: women and an occasional baby carriage; boys playing ball in the streets; men loafing about; a truck backed up to the curb; a motor car sliding along.

Louis didn't see anything but Freddy South getting away. Louis gained on him, and fired three shots, the last one just as Freddy turned into Park Row under the "L." Freddy lurched as the heavy bullet went through his right lung, but he kept on although more slowly.

Panting and sweating and cursing, Louis caught up to Freddy, pressed the nozzle of the pistol savagely into Freddy's side, and said:

"Take this you bastard."

But the pistol jammed, as Freddy with an extra burst of speed jumped ahead a yard or so. Louis threw the useless pistol at his quarry. It bounced off Freddy's head, but he kept on going.

Louis caught up with him again, and delivered a terrific right swing from behind against Freddy's jaw, and knocking Freddy through a barber shop window.

Louis kept right on to the corner, turned it, slowed to a walk, turned the next corner, and went into Palermo's, and walked up to the bar.

"Hello, Louis," said Palermo, who was standing in front of his bar. "How's everything?"

"You ought to know," Louis said. "I been here for the last hour, haven't I? Give us a drink," and he tossed a twenty dollar bill on the bar. "Rye for me, what are you goin' to have, Palermo?"

"Rye," said Palermo.

Louis bought a couple more drinks, including some later arrivals in his invitations, and after about half-an hour, said:

"So long, Palermo, I'm going back to the store."

Ten minutes later, Louis walked into the back room. Bill O'Brien was in there, being waited on by Peter.

"Hello, Bill," Louis said. "I hear two or three guys were just killed around the corner. Did you hear anything about it?"

"I heard a couple of shots," Bill told him, "but they might have been automobiles backfiring; you never can tell these days."

"Oh, I guess it was nothin' but one of those bootlegger battles," Louis said. "Usually the guys that get killed in those battles are better off dead, and it saves the cops a lot of trouble. I guess I'll have a drink myself."

When the police got around to the club two gangsters who they thought were strangers in town and might have come from Chicago were found dead on the floor. The chairs and tables were upset, and there was one empty automatic pistol lying near them.

Nobody knew anything about it.

"I never saw 'em before," Big Italy said. "Some strangers came in here, and before we knew it there was some shooting. We all ducked, and those two guys were dead. There were a half-dozen altogether." The detectives took along Big Italy, Tommy Welch, Kid Quick and Jack Flynn, and held them for three weeks as material witnesses.

But it turned out that the dead men were from Chicago, and were gangsters with records. Nobody was especially interested in the fact that they were dead, except that it was a good thing all around. So the four material witnesses were released.

The afternoon of his release Big Italy was standing at the bar of a saloon that he ran under cover. Dave Russo was offi-

cially the proprietor, but everyone knew who was the real boss. Louis and Kid Quick and Big Italy were drinking together, and not saying much—discussing the latest prices of bootleg booze, and the dispositions of the various cops, when Red McLaurin appeared in the door.

Louis and Kid Quick stepped back from the bar, and Big Italy said:

"Here you are, you bastard."

He used only one revolver and he only fired four shots, but it was at such close range that he couldn't miss.

Louis watched with hard eyes his second best friend clutch at his belly, and sag down to the floor dead. A bullet which had gone right through him, expanding on its journey, had torn a piece out of the door. A big white splotch showed there.

"Pick him up, a couple of you and bring him out here," Big Italy said.

Louis and the Kid lugged what was left of Red out into the back room. Big Italy busted up some furniture, and fired a couple of more shots around the walls. Then he went to a telephone and called "Spring 3100," the telephone number of Police Headquarters.

"This is Big Italy—Salvatore Perugino," he said, giving his name by baptism on one of the rare occasions of his life, but the police knew it, and it sounded more official. "I am talking from Dave Russo's place. I just got here and found Dave up in the air. My old pal, Red McLaurin, was killed by some strange guys out in the back room. Dave says they were shooting all through the place, and there are bullet marks in the front door."

The detectives came in a few minutes, and found Big Italy, Kid Quick and Louis drinking at the bar. Dave had wanted to hide all the liquor, but Big Italy had said to leave it.

"It'll show we're being on the level with 'em," he said.

"They know it's sold here. We don't want to appear to be kidding 'em at all."

"Probably some of that Chicago mob was getting even for those other two guys' murders," one of the detectives commented, after he and his associates had looked around, and asked numerous questions.

Finally, they all had a drink with Big Italy.

"That guy was my best friend next to Italy here," Louis said to the detectives. "Let's have this drink to him wherever he is now."

After the detectives had had their drink, and had gone, Louis said:

"He was a regular guy, if he only could've kept his nose clean."

"How long did you know he didn't?" asked Big Italy, breaking a life time rule of never asking questions.

"Ever since that day he told Miss McInty everything he knew and gave her the apple he stole."

"So did I," said Big Italy.

"The only way you can teach a guy like that anything is with a gun," Louis said. "But I liked that guy."

"So did I," said Big Italy.

The whole mob went to the wake for Red McLaurin, and there was a Solemn High Requiem Mass. Big Italy had all the bills sent to him, and when it was all over he said to Louis:

"I didn't have anything against Red, Louis, and I'd like to send his mother around a little something. Will you take it to her?"

"Sure," Louis told him.

Louis took around ten one hundred dollar bills. Red's mother was weeping when she took them.

"We owed him this from the club, Mrs. Fogarty," Louis

said. "It's good clean money from the rackets and the ball games."

"Patrick was a good boy, although he was a little wild at times, and he liked the girls a bit too well. But he had a way wit' him wit' the women. And, you might mind that my name is not Fogarty now, but O'Malley," said Red's mother.

"He certainly did," Louis replied. "He was one of my best friends, and I feel pretty rotten myself, Mrs. O'Malley. If we ever can do anything you will let us know, won't you?"

"I certainly will, Louis, because I know there was no one that thought more of my Patrick than you did from the time you was little mites running wild in the streets of Chinatown together. I mind that was the time I was married to the German. Humperdinck was my name then."

Mrs. O'Malley, who never had been divorced in her life, but whose chain of husbands was accepted as a matter of course by those who knew her, smiled through her tears, and tweaked Louis' ear playfully.

"And it's a splendid figure of a man you've grown into, Louis," she said.

"I gotta be going," Louis said hastily. "When you good-looking dames get busy on me I know it's time to blow. Goodbye, Mrs. O'Malley."

"Goodbye, Louis, and drop in and see me now and then, and it will remind me of Patrick," Mrs. O'Malley said, beginning to weep again.

The last Louis saw of her she was counting the tear-sprinkled money.

On the street, he hesitated a minute, and then he went into a telephone booth in a drug store on the corner. He gave a number in the Gathedral exchange, uptown, and in a minute said:

"Hello, Baby, got anything on tonight? All right, I'll be up in a half an hour or so."

He dropped into Russo's, and got a couple of bottles of whiskey, and went out and got a taxicab. Half an hour later he entered an apartment house in Manhattan avenue, walked up three flights of stairs, and rang a bell. The door opened, and a rather stout, blonde girl, comely in a hard sort of way, opened the door.

"Hello, Louis," she said. "All alone?"

"Except for a couple bottles of booze, Josie," Louis replied. "How're tricks?" And he laughed and smacked her a good one over the plump backside with the flat of his hand. She wore a thin blue kimono over nothing at all, and the smack echoed sharply along the imitation half-marble lined corridor.

"Oh Jesus," she cried, shutting the door, "but you're rough, Louis. Why don't you learn to be a gennelmun?"

"Where's Sadie?" Louis asked.

"She's inside," said Josie, "getting dolled up."

She put her arms around Louis' neck, and glued her half open mouth to his, and they kissed in the commonly accepted manner of their kind in which the tonsils might be considered as playing as important a role in the caress as the lips.

Louis pulled her kimono open, exposing a sturdy but rather drooping breast. He kissed that. Then he picked her up in his arms and walked down the narrow hall, and turned off into a bedroom. There he tossed her on the bed, and slapped her backside again as she landed sprawling, more out of than in the kimono.

"For Christ's sake, can't you wait a minute?" she said. "Anybody'd think you was a sailor just landed. I'll never let you up here again. What the hell I let you up for this time I dunno."

"Shut up," Louis said.

Later, Louis in trousers and shirt, Josie in her kimono, and

Sadie, a little girl with blue-black hair and olive complexion, her dark prettiness accentuated and cheapened by lavish make-up, sat in the dining room, at a quartered oak table, and drank whiskey.

"Give me a kiss, Louis," Josie said, putting her arm around Louis' neck.

"Aw, can that stuff," Louis said, "and drink your drink. I never could stand that mushy stuff."

"What did you come up here for, anyway?" Josie asked.

"I needed a little excitement," Louis said. "I was born restless."

CHAPTER XII

Big Italy went away to the Atlanta Penitentiary for two years. The night before he surrendered under his bail, to make the trip with a Deputy United States Marshal, there was a racket at the club, an unofficial farewell party to what would have been its undisputed master mind if Louis Beretti in his peculiar way hadn't always seemed to share the honors.

Joe Bergman came over from the East Side with several of his satellites, and Hump Jackson and a few of his followers from the Upper East Side casually dropped in.

There were lots of girls, and there was lots of beer and gin and whiskey. If the police had cared to make one of their occasional general raids in search of suspicious characters, they would have found plenty of promising fish for their net.

"What's th' matter—gotta dirty neck?" a feller would say to a girl touching the locks of hair which spread over her cheek in disorder.

"No, Stupid," a girl would answer, vigorously moistening her fingers and petting the locks in question. "Those are spit curls, if anyone should ask you."

But they revolved around the hall most decorously; it was a matter of pride with everyone to see that the proper floor etiquette was preserved.

Joe Bergman, Hump Jackson, Big Italy and Louis Beretti

sat for the most part at a secluded table, and looked over the festivities with baronial approval. Their positions were more sure in the Social Register of their world than the positions of anyone in any Social Register anywhere. Not even death could make an erasure now.

No robber knight of the Dark Ages ever squatted more securely behind barbican and keep than did these serious-faced, young-old men sit behind their towering walls of reputation for being able to look after themselves and their own.

They didn't say much to each other. They knew either by experience or by first hand information what Big Italy was facing, and they were showing him by their presence at his side that their sympathies were with him.

Later Big Italy and Louis were sitting together, alone, drinking small drinks of straight whiskey from the thick bottomed whiskey glasses.

"How's your mother?" Big Italy asked.

"Not so good, Italy; not so good," Louis said. "I don't know if she'll live long enough to see the new house the old man is building up there, and it ought to be finished next month."

There was a silence of two or three minutes. The couples went shuffling monotonously around the floor, everyone dancing with practiced skill, and with an astonishing lack of conversation, and outward enjoyment. Each male face was serious and set, as if its owner's mind were concentrated on some abstruse mathematical problem; each female countenance was as placid and as vacant of expression as rouged dough.

"I suppose she's gone to bed," said Big Italy finally.

"No," Louis said, "she's probably sitting up in her rocking chair. She doesn't rest so well in bed. And she's probably working on something—makin' a dress or something. She aint happy unless she's doing something with her hands. She may be making a shirt for the old man, but she'll be doing some-

thing if she's awake, and she'll be dreaming of doing something if she's takin' a nap. She don't sleep."

Another silence followed.

"Your father and mother are fine people, Louis," Big Italy said. "That's why I always was after you to stay out of some of those jobs. But you always would be in 'em. I couldn't stop you."

"I dunno," Louis replied. "I guess I was born with that kind of blood in me. I've gotta have excitement."

A longer silence fell.

"If it wasn't so late I'd kinda like to say so long to your mother," Big Italy said. "But I guess she wouldn't care much about seein' me anyway."

"She prays for you just like she does for me," Louis said. "She'll probably give you hell like she does me, but come on around for a minute and we'll see if she's awake."

Big Italy and Louis arose from the table, nodded silently to their friends, and walked out of the hall and downstairs into the street. They got into Big Italy's touring car, which mysteriously became supplied with a hulking red-headed chap with one eye as driver, the moment they appeared.

Silently, they drove around to the fruit store, which was a matter of only ten blocks. Silently, they got out, and went into the doorway next to the store. They walked lightly through the hall, and Louis opened a door at the far end.

The shapeless bulk of Ma Beretti, in a thick green and gray bathrobe, immediately was visible at its accustomed place beside the turkey-red covered table. Her white hair was in disarray. She was vaguely fingering a sock. In front of her on the wall was a figure of Christ on the cross. There was a peculiar odor, slightly ammoniacal, in the room.

On a couch against the wall, was the meager figure of Pa Beretti fully clothed, except for coat and shoes. His thin, tired

face was tilted back, and his mouth was open, revealing scattered yellow teeth. He was snoring like a giant.

Ma looked up as Louis came in and her black eyes, swimming and luminous, warmed and brightened.

"Is that you, Louis?" she asked, her voice sounding like the ghost of its former deep-chested glory. "Don't make a noise; your father is sleeping."

"Hello, Ma," Louis whispered. "I got Big Italy with me. He's going away tomorrow on a trip, and he thought he'd like to come around and see you before he goes."

Ma rolled her head on the crocheted doily which adorned the back of her chair, and made a gesture as if to rise. Then she relaxed painfully.

"Salvatore Perugino!" she said. "Come over here until I look at you."

Big Italy advanced until he reached Ma's outstretched hand. And, then, for some reason which he himself couldn't understand, he put the hand half to his lips and half to his cheek. He felt the roughness of it: the raspy finger tips, the knotted joints. And it felt good to him.

"I haven't seen you for a long time, Ma," he said.

A fleeting suggestion of a smile—a lightening of the eyes, the faintest possible relaxation of the drawn lines of the pain-drawn face—might have given an observer a haunting feeling that many years ago Ma Beretti was much given to laughter, and that when she laughed those who loved her might have deemed her beautiful.

"That reminded me of Salvatore, your father," she said in her husky whisper. "You don't want to be kissing an old woman's hand, Salvatore."

Ma pulled away her hand with something tragically, and yet girlishly appealing in the gesture. Then she said to Big Italy in her native tongue:

"Your father and mother I knew when I was a girl in Italy. They were good, and they planned to work so hard in the new country. They will be so glad where they are now if you are a good man and work hard, Salvatore. I often wonder if you are being a good boy. You should get married and have children. It is having someone to work for that makes you good."

"Italy is a good guy, Ma," Louis told her. "They don't make 'em any better."

"It is a strange place with strange customs in which we live," Ma responded. "You call it good if a man violates the laws but is faithful to his friends. My head is tired now from worry over this liquor business that your father and you and Peter are in.

"I cannot myself see that there is harm if you do not make the boys drunk. But you do make them drunk. But the Government says you should not sell the liquor, and yet the Government men would take money from you if you would give it to them. And they all drink.

"It is not clear to me—all these laws. I feel that God who looks into my heart and my husband's heart knows we have thought of no wrong when we have sold whiskey in our fruit store. And it has brought more of the money that my husband and I have worked so hard all of our lives to get.

"But of what good is money to us, if our children are not good? I can only sit here in a chair, and my husband is building a palace for me in the country. But what good is it? If I have my family, and they are good, that is enough for me."

"Oh, don't worry, Ma," Louis said. "There's nothing to bother about. You'll have a good time in the country. And I promised you, didn't I, that there wouldn't be any trouble from the liquor?"

"Where are you going, Salvatore?" Ma said. "Are you going back to Italy for a visit?" But she interrupted herself. "No, you never have been in Italy and would not want to go. You have

not been bad, and are going to jail are you, Salvatore? I always have been afraid for you and Louis about jail. I would die if Louis ever was sent to jail for doing wrong."

"No," Big Italy said. "I am going on a trip."

"He's going on a business trip, Ma," Louis assured her. "He's going out to the Coast, and maybe he will go up to Canada. He will be gone a long time, and he just wanted to see you before he goes."

"I wish I always could believe you, Louis," Ma said, moving her head wearily from side to side on the back of the chair, which creaked at the slightest shifting of her enormous weight. The doctors had insisted on her staying in bed with a nurse. They said they never had heard of a case like hers in which the patient sat up. But Ma insisted on sitting up, so that she could do things.

It was a mighty job for her to go to the bathroom. She felt that she was going to die each time that she made the journey. But she was too proud to use a bed pan. When she reached that point she knew that she would die of shame, if of nothing else.

She always had taken care of herself, had Ma Beretti. Every day she washed the best she could, and dressed in clean and whole, if darned clothing, on the theory that she might die and be handled by curious and critical strangers. Her children, from infancy had heard her say:

"You can never tell if you might die today, and you should be as ready for strangers to see your clothes and your skin, as you should be ready for God to see your soul."

"Goodbye, Salvatore," Ma said. "And you be a good boy, and go to confession and say your prayers. I will be gone when you come back."

"Oh no, you won't, Ma," Louis replied. "You'll be up in the

new house with everything nice—electric washing machines, and everything."

"And I will come and see you up there," Big Italy said.

Ma smiled.

"Go on, you boys," she said. "I couldn't believe either one of you. But I know."

"Goodbye, Ma," Louis said.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Beretti," Big Italy added. "I hope you're feeling fine when I see you again."

Ma lifted a worn hand, in which was a sock with a hole in it, and moved it in a faint motion of farewell. Pa still was snoring on the sofa, as they went out.

Louis turned to the right and walked a few steps to the door of the fruit store.

"Come in and see the bar, Italy," he said. "And a shot won't do us any harm."

They went through the store where Rosa was sitting alone with the fruit, and through a door at the back into the newly fitted bedroom where Peter and the bartender that he and Louis had hired, had plenty of company. It included Hank Still, Eddie Briggs and Bill O'Brien. Bill whispered to his friends:

"The little guy with the big cigar is Big Italy, the best killer in town. He's going away in the morning to do a bit for smuggling hop in from Canada."

"Hello Bill, Hello Hank, Hello Eddie, Hello," said Louis shaking hands with them and half a dozen others. "I'd like to have you meet my friend, Mr. Perugino," he continued. "And I'll buy. What'll you have?"

Big Italy shook hands all around, and stood listening while the others talked for a moment. He drank his drink, and looked over the new bar, which really was an old bar which had been reconstructed for fresh service, at the array of glasses

and bottles behind it, and the cheese and salami and crackers on a platter.

"You gotta nice place here, Louis," he said. "Let's blow."

They went out to a chorus of "So longs," and "Good lucks," and pleas to have another.

"You gotta good business and a good place, Louis," Big Italy said, "and of course no one is goin' to bother you. They're too wise."

"I'm thinkin' of opening another place uptown a little further," Louis told him. "Why should a guy only have one place when he can have more?"

"I dunno," Big Italy said. "But in this kind of business it takes a good guy to run one place and make money out of it. There's a lot of money in it, but the cops and the Prohibition agents have gotta get a living out of it too—and those bastards want to ride in limousines these days."

"I got the place all picked out anyway," Louis said. "I wanta build me a place in the country too. I'd like to get married and settle down."

Big Italy looked at him.

"You got the bug to have kids," he said.

"That's right, Italy," Louis admitted. "Maybe it's because I've heard the old lady talking about it for so many years, but I've got the yen for a kid and a frau."

"Well, you haven't any record against you, Louis. And if you just keep goin' the way you are and don't look for trouble you won't have any. Need any money?"

Louis shook his head.

"No," he replied. "Thanks just the same, Italy, but I'm getting by and I can pay you back that two grand I got from you any time."

Big Italy waved his cigar.

"You'll take good care of it till I get back," he said.

The touring car pulled up at the building where the racket was being held.

"I was just thinking," Big Italy said, "that a pipe and a girl would go fine. It'll be quite a while before I get either of 'em again."

"That suits me, Italy," Louis agreed. "Do you want to say a word to the mob first?"

"What the hell," Big Italy said. "Let's go."

On their way to the pipe and the girls, Big Italy broke a silence of several minutes to say:

"It did me a lotta good to see your old lady, Louis. She is one swell dame."

"She does a guy good," Louis said.

CHAPTER XIII

Louis Beretti, in a blue suit, black tie, gray felt hat and freshly polished black shoes and with a shave, stopped in at his bar, and met Hank and Eddie Briggs.

Both of them were deeply impressed by Louis' garb. Hank rubbed his eyes and said: "I'm seeing things again."

Eddie said: "Who's the dame, Louis? She must be something special. Have a drink."

Louis made a deprecatory gesture with a big right hand, on which it was at once obvious that the nails had been manicured, and grinned pleasantly.

"Every guy has got to get married once in his life, hasn't he? I gotta have a baby and that's the only way I figure I can get one, and get it right. What d'you think of her?" Louis said, pulling a photograph from his inside pocket.

Eddie and Hank put their heads together and saw the rather poor photograph of a comely enough young woman in a bathing suit. She was sturdily and not unattractively constructed, and good nature shone from her face.

"She's a peach," Hank said.

"She's fine," Eddie commented. "Have another drink."

"She ain't cross-eyed anyway," Louis said, "and she's not the kind that runs around. She works down at Liebermann's. She's the cashier down there. She's got a lot of sense."

"She looks Irish," Eddie said. "What's her name?"

"She is Irish," Louis admitted. "Her name is Margaret Lynch; and her father is a fireman. The family are all good Catholics, and she's a good Catholic too."

"When are you going to get married, Louis?" Eddie asked.

"In about a month, I guess," Louis said. "She wants to get married and have a home of her own just like I do. This isn't any snappy affair; this is business."

"Have a drink," Eddie said.

"You fellers have another drink with me, and then I've gotta go," Louis said, looking at his watch. "Maggie and I are going to a movie tonight."

They had their drink, and Louis went out, and got in his new sedan. He felt pretty good as he slid in under the wheel and pressed the self-starter. He was on the road towards becoming a substantial business man. The car got under way, and he had time to wave to a policeman before he turned a corner.

Two blocks further on he passed the church he attended. He doffed his hat. Father McCann was standing in the door of the parish house. Louis waved, and Father McCann waved back. Father McCann knew where Louis stood, which was solidly with the church and against participation in any more offenses against property. Louis was perfectly satisfied to be a good bootlegger. Louis never would have killed anyone whom he didn't think was better off dead, and he didn't intend to kill anyone now. Father McCann understood him, and Louis understood Father McCann.

They were friends, and often chatted together. Father McCann was deeply interested in Louis; for one reason, Ma and Pa Beretti were among his most consistent and devout parishioners. The entire Beretti family, with the exception of Louis, always had been most satisfactory citizens and Christians. But Father McCann had the feeling that there was a deal more of

interest in Louis, the backslider of the family, than in the others.

In a purely spiritual crisis the members of the Beretti clan would have turned to Ma Beretti, and Ma would have turned to Father McCann. But Father McCann knew that in any purely objective situation, Louis would be the one to whom they all would turn. There was something extremely solid and self-reliant about Louis. You knew just to look at him that he would be there in a pinch. Even if you didn't know anything of his history, you would never take Louis for one of the weak ones of the earth.

If you knew Louis, and knew of the police beatings he had taken without a squawk, and of the dope habit that he had evaded, and of the revolvers, knives, fists, tables and flying bottles that he had faced not only with courage, but also with conquering strength and resource, of course you would know that in his own hard world Louis was a leading citizen.

Everyone who knew Louis treated him with the respect due a human being who could make his way in a tough environment. Policemen were pleasant to him; clergymen bowed cordially; judges stopped to pass the time of day; lawyers and doctors liked him.

If he ever had told you that he would do a certain thing at a certain time, he had done it. If he ever had owed you money he had paid it. If you wanted something done, and it was possible to do it, and Louis liked you he would do it. If Louis knew something unflattering about you, you could be sure that so far as he was concerned no one else would know it. If you did Louis any harm you knew you had best look out.

Kid Quick had said once about him: "Everybody is careful to please Big Italy because he is the boss; but you'll notice that Big Italy himself always is extra nice to Louis Beretti."

Louis' thoughts as he rode uptown towards the flat where

Margaret lived with her family weren't on gangs, or anything connected with them. They entirely were concentrated on the possibilities of having a son.

Margaret was a good girl. She wasn't a chaser. She had been working as a cashier in the restaurant ever since she got through high school. She could cook and she could sew. She was a very good cook for an Irish girl, and with a little training she would get the hang of spaghetti, ravioli, and that sort of thing. She was the kind of dame who would stay home and let the husband do the staying out nights. Louis wasn't thinking of doing any staying out nights, but if there was any to be done it was comforting to think that he and not Margaret was going to do it.

Louis had met her on a party at Coney Island, and he had noticed her especially because she didn't drink. She was with a big red-haired chap whom Louis didn't know, but who answered to the name of Mike.

Before the evening was over Louis learned that the reason Margaret didn't drink was because she had promised her father and mother not to drink until after she was married. And he also learned that Mike was her brother.

"He only took me along because he had a fight with the girl he is going with, and didn't want to take anyone else," she explained.

"Can I come up and see you some night, Margaret?" Louis said.

"Sure," she replied. "I'd be glad to have you come."

"All right, tomorrow night," Louis said.

"That'll be fine," Margaret said.

Louis tried to kiss Margaret on the way home in a taxicab, after they had been to their first theater together. Margaret pushed him aside quietly, and said:

"I've never been kissed when I was willing, Louis; and I've

never had any use for any fellow who has kissed me against my will. I'll never kiss a man unless I'm engaged to him."

"A kiss never hurt anyone," Louis said.

"I know most of the girls have a good time petting, and get married just the same. But I don't know. I don't feel that way about it."

Louis kissed her anyway, but he might just as well have kissed a cake of ice. She sat like a stone and looked straight ahead. And when Louis stopped, baffled, she said:

"It's too bad you did that, because I liked you."

"Well," Louis replied, "I figured we were engaged and it was all right."

Louis thought he noticed just a bit of softening in Margaret at that. Anyhow, she looked quickly at him, and said:

"It seems to me that you were taking an awful lot for granted."

"I took your own words for it," Louis told her. "You said you never would kiss anyone unless you were engaged to them, and I was trying to find out if you were engaged to me."

"It's a serious subject," Margaret said. "And it's nothing to be joked about."

"We'll see who's joking," Louis replied, suddenly discovering that if he really wanted to get married and have children he could feel surer of this girl than any whom he knew—and would care to live with.

He never had thought about marrying any specific girl, but it came rather as a surprise to him that he was contemplating wedlock with a girl who was not an Italian. He had a slight feeling of weariness because he felt his mother, who finally had been confined to bed, would not be unqualifiedly pleased over his choosing a wife of another nationality.

Ma Beretti thought that everything good was Italian. If you had told her that Christ was a Jew, she would have been

shocked and hurt. Her conception of Christ and the Virgin Mary was based on efforts of Italian artists, who used Italian models. She was a good Christian, but along nationalistic lines.

Louis knew that she never had even dreamed that one of her children might marry outside of his race.

"But she won't kick much," Louis thought, "because, after all, she'll be glad to have me married."

"Well, are we engaged?" Louis asked Margaret, wondering in his own mind if he really was sure he meant what he said. He hardly could realize that this was he talking. It didn't sound like himself. Well, he couldn't have been expected to be familiar with the procedure of asking a dame to marry him. He hadn't ever done it before.

He had seen some gallant proposals of matrimony on the stage, and he had read of a few in books, but one of the commonest forms of getting married with which he was familiar was that a man tousled a girl because he couldn't help it, and in the midst of the tousling, the girl said:

"When are we going to get married?"

And if a guy cared that much about the girl he married her. A guy had to get married sometime. It was on the books. A wife and children were as necessary in adult life for most men, as measles and mumps had been to the childhood of his generation.

The girls Louis saw around weren't the sort that had much hope of marriage. One of them did get a husband now and then, but most of them were of the variety that had been easily persuaded when they were young, and found it simpler to continue to be more and more easily persuaded as they grew older.

"I can't believe you're serious, Louis," Margaret said. "We haven't known each other very long; you don't know me very well, and I don't know you very well. Every girl, I guess, wants

to get married sometime, and I'm no different from the rest. But I never thought you would want to marry me."

As a matter of fact, Margaret had dreamed of an entirely different courtship than this. She was a devotee of motion pictures, and she read many novels; and while she never had crystallized a mental picture of romance as applied to herself, it certainly had something to do with a very gallant male who devoted himself to her somewhat after the manner of a love slave; who sent her a bit of poetry maybe; who contrived to be masterful into the bargain; and who made love to her somewhere in the moonlight with music in the distance.

Her soul yearned for some large ecstasy which didn't seem to be wrapped up in Louis Beretti; and yet Louis Beretti was a sturdy masculine oak; he had a good liquor business—the old barroom, and a place with a dining room in mid-town—and there was every prospect that he would have more.

She was tired of working in the restaurant. She wanted to get married more than she ever had admitted even to herself. In fact, although she never admitted it to herself, she would have liked very much to have done a bit of petting like the other girls. The teaching and the watchfulness of her father and mother and her brothers, and her regular journeys to the church and to the confessional, however, had put her in a rut of proper conduct from which it would have been as impossible for her to escape as for the Colorado River to leap the confining walls of the Grand Canyon.

Perhaps at sixteen the greatest romance in her life had come with John McGill, a red-headed Scotch lad of twenty, whose father had made him a slater and roofer so far as outward appearances went, but who really was a reincarnation of an old time troubadour, if such a phenomenon were possible.

John used to stand in front of her tenement and play a ukulele and sing, until he got chased away. And she knew that

he played and sang for her benefit. He climbed the fire escape one night to talk to her through the window, and Old Lady McGeoghan on the floor below had stuck her head out of the window and screamed for the police.

He told wonderful adventure stories, and took her rowing in Central Park Lake several times, and in Bronx Park once. But even at that age she could see that he was impossible.

He didn't like to work, and made no secret of it. His father had a prosperous business, and continually was fighting with John to get him to pay some attention to slating and roofing. But John liked to play the ukulele, and push pool balls around in the Cameo Pool Parlor, and tell stories, and drink.

Strangely enough, although he was tall and handsome and had a way with him with all ladies from cradle to wheel chair, he had a queer streak of gallantry, and was not given to physical love making.

When Margaret told Louis that she never had been kissed when she was willing she was telling what might have been termed a white lie. The last time she had been canoeing with John he had kissed her. She hadn't kissed him back, so perhaps that gave her a right to take the position that she hadn't been willing.

As a matter of fact, she had been suffocated with ecstasy. She had been gloriously numb, and yet tingling through it all, from her head to her toes. They had gotten on the subway after that and ridden home decorously enough, so far as she was concerned, but quite happily and spiritedly so far as John was concerned.

Her feelings when she had been kissed were so exquisitely strange that they made Margaret think there had been a sin involved in the transaction somewhere, even if she hadn't aided and abetted in it. So, that night, after she had said her prayers and had gone to bed, she did a deal of serious thinking. And

she came to the conclusion that John McGill was a lightheaded Scotchman, and a Protestant to boot, and that while she might get some temporary bliss from association with him, nothing but black despair could result from pursuing the adventure.

She was cold to John after that. He sent her a poem or two. Then he sent her a letter, and some candy. She was pleasant but distant. She would have been miserable if she hadn't felt the satisfactory thrill of martyrdom for a righteous cause. The religious issue gave her a chance to associate herself with God and conscience in the matter.

Chances were that she never would erase entirely from mind the picture of long, slim, red-headed John McGill letting the slating and roofing business go hang, while he bent joyously over the clicking pool balls, or tossed down sparkling alcoholic drinks, or went drifting over placid waters in a canoe, tweaking the strings of his ukulele, and singing in his rich baritone—to another girl.

John McGill was a wonderful boy, but she had the womanly feeling that he never would grow up. She had a yearning to look after him, but her intuition told her, if her intelligence did not, that there was no permanent profit in making a husband a substitute for a baby. But she always had an empty feeling when she thought of her red-headed slater and roofer.

Louis Beretti was entirely different. She looked at him as he sat in the cab beside her. He wasn't very tall, but he was very broad and well built. The scars on his face failed to spoil his dark good looks.

He had a rough, direct way with him, and she did not have to be told that romance was not in his line. Vaguely, she knew that he was a power in his own neighborhood, that even gunmen would take orders from him. But she had heard of him as a man who was straight among men; and one who was building up a big business. Her father had told her he was a man to

tie to. Margaret had no scruples about the nature of his business. Everybody drank, and someone had to sell the drinks.

Louis, meanwhile, was thinking what a sap he had been to say, "Are we engaged?" That wasn't like him. He was disgusted with himself. What he wanted was a good healthy woman to be his wife, and the mother of his children; a dame who was a good Catholic, and didn't chase. Here she was. What was he stalling about?

He put a big arm around her waist, and pulled her to him.

"We're going to get married, Margaret," he said. "What's the use of kidding about it?"

CHAPTER XIV

Louis and Margaret were married by Father McCann on a rainy May morning two months later. Ma Beretti, who was very ill indeed, and knew it better than any member of her family thought she did, had urged the marriage.

"Louis is a good boy," she had told Margaret, "but he has the wildness of this country in him. He will not work eighteen hours a day as his father would, and he does not save his money. He spends it. You will have to do the best you can about saving.

"But Louis makes a lot of money—a lot of money, I guess. Sometimes I worry about that. I never liked to see the boys drinking too much whiskey.

"It is the law not to sell wine, and even my husband makes and drinks wine, and I liked my wine before I grew so sick. And now the doctor has me take brandy. I do not understand this Prohibition, but I hope that Louis is right, and that he will not have to go to jail ever for selling whiskey and wine and beer.

"You are a good girl, and you will make Louis a good wife, I am sure. I am sorry that I am too sick to show you how to cook some of the things that Louis likes so much. My daughters will be glad to do the best they can, but my husband will tell you there is no one who can cook like I can."

Ma Beretti was very tired, and her body had grown heavier as the hold of her spirit on life had grown lighter and lighter. Her work-marked hands, with no more work to do, seemed to bother her a great deal. She moved them restlessly. She was a woman to whom births had been mere incidents in the labor of life, and for whom death could mean little except another incident in the chain of events. It was nothing she could work on; it merely was something which she had to await.

She was going to Heaven, which must be a good place because it housed God and His Angels and Saints, but she wasn't starting on the trip with many inward Hallelujahs. She was too worried about what Pa would do without her until he also was ready to make the journey.

Pa knew that Ma was going to die: the doctors had told him so; but he couldn't believe it. He was hurrying frantically to get that house in Westchester done so that he could move Ma to it. He was sure that the electric washing machines, and the electric stove, and the oil heater, and other conveniences would bring Ma around. The poor man never realized that Ma was the last person on earth who could be thrilled by a labor saving device.

If she knitted a pair of socks for her man she knew they were right. If she scrubbed his clothes in a tub of soapsuds mingled with her own honest perspiration, she was sure they were clean. If she got down on her hands and knees and scoured a floor, she was positive by personal observation that no speck of dust had escaped her practiced efforts.

Ma was brought into the world to do a job of personal service. She had been cook, partner, mate, barber, masseuse, nurse, hired man, hired girl, haven in hour of storm, North Star in moments of wandering off course, banker, adviser, comforter, and chastening rod in the hand of the Lord to the various members of her family.

She hadn't had anything to do with the liquor business, but she had had plenty to do with the fruit and soda business, and through it she had seen her husband acquire about a hundred thousand dollars in real and personal property. She felt privately that she had earned the one hundred thousand dollars, although she never breathed a word of that to anyone. She was certain that Pa would have continued to sing songs in Italy, if she hadn't stuck a piece of dynamite under his coat tail and blown him across the ocean to the land of opportunity. And she wasn't so sure that he wouldn't still be trundling a pushcart full of bananas through the streets, if she hadn't paid just as much attention to his business as she had to her family.

Ma Beretti was one of those women who prove that the feminine is the stronger sex. A mere man would have died in Ma's first confinement. It served only as a spur to Ma. The children certainly were going to have advantages that she and Pa had missed. A street cleaner wore a uniform, and got a pension when he grew old; a postman worked for the Government, and was sure of his salary, and pension too. Ma never figured on one of her boys being President; one of the reasons was that she didn't exactly know what the President was.

Pa had become a citizen through the kind offices of Tammany Hall. He was well drilled and well chaperoned when he applied for his first and second papers. He was told over and over again that if he was asked who made the laws of the United States, he should reply, "The Congress."

It happened that very question was the only one asked in his case, and he replied, "De Cong." So it was all right.

There was a slight hitch over the fact that he couldn't read and write, but a kindly Judge was told that he was good to his wife and family, and owned property, so that was all right too.

Ma never even knew "De Cong" had anything to do with making the laws. On her death bed she still was of the convic-

tion that some strange, demented individuals with strong persecution complexes had made the laws, mostly to befuddle good Christians who wanted to do right.

Louis and his bride, and his new father-in-law, and mother-in-law, and the Berettis all gathered in Ma's bedroom for a moment after the ceremony. Ma sipped some champagne with them, and her eyes almost sparkled as she looked at the bride. She was thinking what a good job of work the bride had ahead of her, and was hoping that she had the stomach and backbone to see it through. She felt a faint regret she wouldn't be on hand to help with the first born; she always had helped herself, but then she had come of different stock.

The bride kissed Ma, whose leather cheeks would have blushed if they had had a blush left in them, and then the bride whispered to Louis, and Louis went over and kissed his mother. A feeble movement of one of her hands was the only trace that existed of what she had instinctively intended to be a shove for Louis.

She hadn't been much of a kisser—had Ma Beretti. She had been too busy tending store, and looking after her home and the family.

Peter, who had grown fat with prosperity, and his wife, who had grown fat along with him, and John, and the girls, were all dressed up for the occasion, and so was Pa, who had on a shiny black suit, stiff collar and black, tied-at-the-factory cravat. But their spirits weren't so very high. They talked in subdued voices in the bedroom. Pa talked about the house in Westchester.

"It is costing a lot of money," he said, "but I am doing it for my wife. Now I have got the kitchen fixed with one of those sinks with a place to wash dishes on one side with electricity, and to wash the clothes on the other side with electricity. My

wife can just press a button, and watch the work get done while she sits. Also the furnace works by oil."

He gestured widely with his hands, drawing diagrams in air of the various ingenuities he was having installed. The hard wood floors would save Ma a lot of work too. And he was even thinking of a garden that Ma could watch grow. His thoughts of Ma were tinged with the idea of work—even if it were in a negative sense.

"But, of course, I am going to have a woman to do the work until my wife gets better," he boasted.

"Aw, can it," Louis said finally. "Let's get along uptown."

They said goodbye to Ma, and went out and got into their automobiles to make the trip. The automobiles had been bought with money from the liquor. Louis and Peter and John all had sedans, and they were of the same make.

Louis' mid-town place was a restaurant called The Cellar Door, and they had their wedding feast there. Enormous quantities of food were eaten, and a large number of rather poor and questionable jokes were poked at the bride and groom. Louis drank a bit too much, but it was the ordinarily rather restrained Peter who was the life of the party.

Peter had left the street cleaning department after the first speakeasy was a success, and was devoting himself with tremendous energy to the enterprise. He had inherited all of his mother's thrift, and he had an eagle eye for a stolen drink or a wasted pretzel. Now, however, he was on a real holiday, and profligate might be a good word with which to describe his attitude.

He insisted on buying drinks for everyone who came into the restaurant while the party was in progress.

"What do you want? Is everybody happy?" was his formula. "We only live once," he kept saying.

Peter had raised a mighty stomach across which was strung

a gold chain with large links. From the middle of the chain an Elk's tooth dangled, like an unfortunate Alpine climber who had slipped while essaying a dangerous steep, and now hung suspended in mid-air. The elk's tooth was at least a foot from the nearest portion of its master's anatomy when its master was standing. Only when Peter sat down did the tooth get repose on one of Peter's knees. Fortunately for the tooth, Peter sat down a great deal.

Peter had hard gray eyes, and the large expressionless face of an Alderman or a prosperous saloonkeeper of the old days. He might have been created expressly for the job, that had fallen to him, which was overseeing the details of a retail liquor business.

Louis got the liquor in various ways, and arranged for the protection. He cut the whiskey and made the gin, from the very beginning using only alcohol that had been tested by a chemist.

"Dead customers are no use to anybody," he had said when talking over the matter with Big Italy.

Peter and his wife made the fruit store and its annexed bar their home for twelve or fourteen hours a day. It was perfectly natural for them to work that length of time, and just to be in a store with nothing to do but hand customers what they wanted, and drop money in a cash register was more like an amazing game to them than work.

If there was the slightest sign of trouble with a patron of the bar who had had too much, Peter would send for Louis. No one would mind Peter even if he scowled and made threats. Everybody, even the most noisy and belligerent victims of alcohol, obeyed Louis' slightest word.

Louis hadn't put a bar in the uptown place, but had fixed up the single big room as a restaurant. He had sixty tables, and

provided an Italian table d'hôte meal for a dollar and served steaks and chops à la carte.

A stranger could go in there and eat, but there was no way for him to buy a drink. He could see others drinking cocktails, or sipping what he knew was red wine with their victuals, but argue and plead as he might he couldn't get anything stronger than near beer. The Courts treated so-called possession cases as no cases at all; it took bona fide sales of alcohol to put a bootlegger in serious legal jeopardy.

Louis kept his main stock of wines and liquors in a room on the top floor of the four story building. Only a sufficient supply for immediate necessities ever was brought down to the first floor to the restaurant. He spent most of his time in this place himself, but when he wasn't there, Kid Quick was in charge.

The Kid was not as watchful as usual on the occasion of the wedding breakfast-luncheon. He had violated his usual rule of not taking anything to drink himself during working hours, and hadn't even minded when the waiters took a few drinks themselves. It was a holiday occasion, and everyone was supposed to be merry. He had a case of champagne downstairs, and plenty of whiskey and gin.

Margaret's father, Dan, was making his fifth or sixth speech of the occasion, and her rosy cheeked, smiling faced, comfortably cushioned mother, was just saying for the twentieth or thirtieth time, "Give Dan a drink or two and he can't stop talking," when three men entered the restaurant.

Two of them ran as fast as they could between the tables and chairs back to the service room, and the third turned to the wedding party, and a dozen or so other men and women at table, and said:

"Take it easy. Take it easy now. And get along about your business, all of you."

Louis instantly had recognized the man as Sam Cohen, at the moment the most publicized of the Prohibition enforcement raiders. Almost daily the newspapers carried an account of the latest exploit of Sam and his partner Cosey Brown. Sam and Cosey became quasi-humorous figures. Newspaper columnists used them for quip material; special writers amused themselves by writing humorous stories about them; and both Sam and Cosey loved it. They were supposed to be unapproachable, so far as influence or bribes were concerned.

"Just sit still and don't worry," Louis said to Margaret. "I gotta see what these bums want."

"What the hell do you want coming in here like this?" Louis asked Sam Cohen. "Who are you?"

"Don't get excited Mr. Beretti," Sam Cohen explained, trembling with pleasure, "I'm Sam Cohen, perhaps you have heard of me, and I've got a search warrant for this place."

"Let's see it," Louis demanded.

A glance showed him that one Joseph Peters being sworn, had deposed that he had bought drinks in the restaurant called The Cellar Door, at 75 cents the drink. Louis was reading the search warrant, when Cosey Brown appeared at the service door and called:

"We got some stuff here, but there may be more: we're going to look good."

Louis eyed Sam Cohen with hate in his heart and disgust in his eyes. Sam was a little, untidy individual. His sparse mouse colored hair under his old derby was mussed; his red striped green shirt was faded and soiled; his collar was gray, and there were black rims under his ragged finger nails. His shrewd, hungry black eyes of a ferret weren't set any too far apart. His shoes, even, looked as if they hadn't been shined for days. And any resident of New York who hasn't a shoe shine has let himself slip pretty far down the social scale.

One glance at Sam was enough to convince anyone that either Sam Cohen was a great actor, or else he was just as honest as he pretended to be. He was one Prohibition Agent who looked as if he might be living on the salary that all Prohibition Agents were supposed to live on.

Louis thought fast. He stepped back to Peter's side, and said to him in a quiet voice:

"It's those bastards, Sam and Dan. Jim Coyle must have had something to do with Sam's appointment, as Sam comes from his district. You get out and call up Jim on the telephone—raise him if you've got to telephone all over town—and tell him I want him to call up here and tell Sam to listen to what I've got to tell him."

Joe, who had been growing more sober by the second since the advent of the raiders, promptly made for the door. In an emergency Louis was boss.

"Everybody out except Mr. Beretti and the waiters," Sam said importantly, speeding Peter with a push on the back.

"Hey, wait a minute," Louis objected. "This is a restaurant, and no law is being violated here. You don't want to break up a man's business. Wait a minute."

"Dan has got the stuff outside," Sam said, smiling so that he showed yellow teeth plentifully decorated with gold. "And we'll get more. Sam and Cosey don't make any mistakes. You better be quiet and it'll be better for you. These people had better go out because I am in charge here now, and I don't want 'em in here."

The members of the wedding party, including Margaret, but not including her father, would have been extremely upset if, unconsciously they hadn't placed so much faith in Louis. Margaret's father was being held down in his chair by John Beretti on one side, and his son, Mike, on the other. He wanted to get up and throw the agents out into the street. Little would be

gained by quoting what he had to say about Prohibition Agents. They were various varieties of rats and lice, at best.

"It's a hell of a way to treat a wedding," he complained.

Half an hour passed. Louis had persuaded Sam to let the wedding party remain where it was. Sam was elated over having gotten the champagne, two bottles of Scotch, three bottles of rye, a gallon of gin, and a demijohn of red wine. And he had hopes that Cosey and his aide, who were busy opening closets and sounding walls, and probing in pots out in the kitchen would find more plunder.

Then the telephone rang. Louis who had been waiting impatiently for the tinkle of the bell, picked up the receiver.

"Hello, this is Coyle. What the hell is the matter?"

"Didn't Peter tell you?"

"Sure. Put that Jew bum on the telephone, and I'll tell him something. I would've talked to him before but I never got around to it."

"All right, Jim."

Louis turned to Sam Cohen, and said:

"Telephone for you, Sam."

"Who is it?" Sam asked.

"I dunno," Louis said. "What the hell do I know about your business?"

"Hello, hello," said Sam. "Who is this?"

"Oh, Mr. Coyle," he said. "How are you Mr. Coyle?"

"Yes, Mr. Coyle."

"No, no, I can't."

"I couldn't."

"Well, maybe it could be arranged."

"Yes, Mr. Coyle."

"All right. Goodbye, Mr. Coyle."

Sam was sweating, and looking more mean and miserable than ever, when he hung up the receiver, and turned to Louis.

"Could I talk to you a minute, Mr. Beretti?" he asked.

"Sure," Louis said, and led the way over to the cigar counter and cashier's desk by the door. And that's how it happened that the official report on what was found at Beretti's Restaurant read:

"1 gal. vinegar."

It cost Louis five hundred dollars. It started Sam and Cosey on the way to diamonds, automobiles and shoe shines. Louis went back to the table, and said:

"Everything's all right. Let's have another drink."

Margaret and Louis left the party shortly after that, and went out to Louis' automobile.

"We were going to Montreal," he said, "but I guess we'll go home instead. Those bastards, Sam and Cosey have got our roll."

"All right, Louis," Margaret said. "I'll be just as happy."

"And Montreal will still be there," Louis said.

CHAPTER XV

Louis had leased and furnished a modern five-room apartment on Washington Heights. He had a kitchen, a dining room, a living room and two bedrooms, and had considered that he was rather spreading himself.

"But a guy don't get married every day," he said.

The apartment was on the tenth floor, and from the living room there was a view of the Hudson, with the electric signs flashing on the Jersey shore at night; and from the south bedroom there was a glimpse of uptown Broadway.

"The air is better up here on the hill," he told Margaret, when they got out of the sedan, and walked into the rather ornate entrance for the first time as man and wife. But what he was thinking was, "The Drive is a handy place to wheel a baby."

"I think it is splendid, Louis," Margaret said when they entered the apartment. "But it cost a lot of money."

"It took three grand to fix the place up," Louis admitted, turning on the radio. "But business is pretty good, and I'm hoping it'll get better."

"Aren't you going to kiss me?" Margaret asked, holding her mouth up invitingly.

"Sure," Louis said, turning with one hand still on the radio dial. "Sure, Margaret."

And he put the other arm around her and kissed her.

"I'm awfully tired, with the excitement and everything," Margaret said. "You know I thought I wouldn't be bothered at all; we had such a quiet wedding, but I was so excited I didn't think I could stand up."

"Sure," Louis said, taking his hand from the dial, and putting that around her too.

"You're awfully rough, Louis," Margaret said. "And that radio is squawking terribly."

Louis picked up Margaret in his arms, and walked with her towards the bedroom.

"What are you doing, Louis?" Margaret asked, breathlessly.

Louis kicked open the bedroom door, and dumped Margaret on the bed.

"What's the matter, Louis?" Margaret complained. "You're awfully rough. Don't."

"How do you undo this damned thing?" Louis said, muddling with a hook and eye.

Margaret, in sort of trance, unsnapped the hook. Louis hauled the dress over her head.

"Oh, Louis, don't!" Margaret said.

Louis never had read any of the books or listened to any of the lectures on the etiquette of handling brides. In some social sets it might be the custom to wait until a bride has doffed her shoes before tucking her between the sheets, but Louis didn't even bother about turning down the sheets.

Margaret had some vague idea that a bit more of decorum was usually observed on such occasions—that the bride and groom might eat a sandwich or drink a dish of tea, or glance at the evening newspaper before retiring. She had been wondering just how she would get around the embarrassment of preparing for the first night with her husband, and had had

an idea that he might wait in the living room for her to get all snug in bed, with the lights turned out.

But Margaret wasn't a delicate plant. She was sturdy and strong, and while she felt as if she should be indignant with Louis for his way with her, she really found it most exciting and stimulating. She never had drunk alcohol before, and the champagne had acted as an aphrodisiac, and also had dulled her sensibilities.

Louis found her delightfully fresh after the stale female diet to which he had been accustomed. Her naïveté pleased him. And, if he had told anyone about the adventure, which he never did, he would have said that he was careful.

Margaret had been fond of Louis before. She had felt a vague sense of religious ecstasy, and a sort of solemn fear when he had placed the ring on her finger—two souls being joined together for better or for worse for this life and the life hereafter as well. She knew she had found a flesh and blood mate, when Louis took her. And she loved him then, and always afterwards. He was her man.

He was a rough man, and hairy. He belched more often than was strictly necessary, and grunted when he felt like grunting. But she had been used to men who smacked their lips over their food and drink in the privacy of their own homes. And he could toss her one hundred and thirty pounds around as if it were as many ounces. She said, "O, Louis!" But she liked it.

"Treat a whore like a Duchess, and a Duchess like a whore," is one of the oldest recipes for success in amorous enterprise. But Louis was no example of a success with either. He always paid for any success he may have had with the fair sex. Its weaker members were merely objects of temporary diversion to him, forgotten as soon as used: and he paid for a mother of his child by marrying her. He was no Lothario.

After Louis had proved to himself that he really was mar-

ried, he lay on his back and snored. Perhaps, if Margaret had been a more delicate human organism, this would have revolted her. Instead of being revolted, however, she turned over on her right side and snored. If it hadn't been from habit founded on information that this was the best position for sleeping, because it raised the heart and let the blood flow down, she never would have had the energy to turn on her right side: she would have remained right on her back where Louis left her.

Margaret was up before Louis in the morning, and she didn't call him until she had breakfast ready on the dining room table. When she spoke to him, he reached out a big hand and pulled her into bed. And they would have eaten cold eggs and drunk cold coffee, if she hadn't made a second breakfast.

After breakfast, Margaret asked what they were going to do that day.

"We lost our trip," she said, "but I thought we might take the car and have a ride somewhere."

"That'll come all right," replied Louis pleasantly. "But I want to go down and look in at both places, and see that everything is O.K. Peter is good at counting up the cash register, and seeing that all the customers pay for their drinks, but that lets him out. He's no bargain."

"But you couldn't have looked after your business if we'd been on our way to Canada," Margaret objected.

"But we aint on our way to Canada."

"But I don't want to see anyone except you today," Margaret said. "I don't want to see my family or any of my friends."

"Ha! Ha!" Louis laughed. "Baby's got a guilty conscience. Well, you needn't have," he added. "But I'll get back just as soon as I can, and we can drive up the road somewhere for dinner. I'd like a shore dinner myself."

Margaret had to be satisfied with that. And when he came home, smelling rather strongly of whiskey, but not obviously under its influence, and slapped her backside pleasantly, and told her to shake a leg because they were on their way, she felt a vague satisfaction that she had married a man who wasn't going to be tied to a woman's apron strings.

Margaret was a sturdy, self-reliant girl, who had earned her own living without any difficulty. But here, at the very beginning of her marriage, she had become the cook and was wholly dependent upon her husband. He had bustled off to his business just as he had on every other day, and she had stayed home waiting for him to return. Louis was the head of the family. And she knew it.

They quickly dropped into a routine, which, however, was not the sort of routine that most married persons anticipate. Louis never pretended to try to get home regularly for dinner. If no outside interest interfered he went home; if any outside interest did interfere, he didn't go home.

It quickly developed that Louis was practically sure of eating at home two nights a week, and that his usual hour for getting there was four or five o'clock in the morning. And he always arose at eleven.

Margaret never complained, however. She had become acquainted with two or three other young married women in the neighborhood. She did her housework, and either visited her mother, or her mother visited her. And she gave little parties for her old friends.

She never thought of asking to learn to drive the sedan, and Louis never thought of suggesting it to her. In fact, he never considered using the subway. He always drove downtown in the car, and drove home in it.

It didn't seem to matter, either, how drunk he was when he entered his car; he always got home, although on one or two

occasions he admitted that he had had a hard time keeping the car between the curb lines.

He admitted himself that he was drinking more than was good for him—thirty or forty drinks of whiskey a day—but he said that he had to drink with his customers as a matter of business, and that after he had got the fire inside himself going he had to keep throwing in fuel.

Margaret took his drinking for granted. Her father and brothers always had drunk, and although Louis drank more in a day then they usually did in a week, he never showed the effects of it in a particularly unpleasant way. He always came home somehow, and he always undressed himself, and got into bed. And in the morning he never complained of a headache. He merely took a couple of large drinks of whiskey, got into his clothes, drank a cup or two of coffee, read the newspaper and went back downtown again.

She wouldn't have called this an ideal married life, but it sufficed. Louis gave her plenty of money for her own needs, and she always could take friends to a motion picture or a Broadway show. She never missed a week at the Palace, or the Capitol, which was the newest and biggest motion picture theater in town at that time.

After two months she knew that she was going to have a baby. When she told Louis he grinned a real grin, slapped her backside heartily, and hoisted her clear off the floor.

"Look out now," she warned. "You'll have to be more gentle with me after this, if you don't want anything to happen to little Louis."

"For God's sake!" Louis said. "You don't think I've done anything to hurt the baby do you?"

"No," she said, smiling cheerfully in her first superior moment since the wedding. "Dr. Fiaschetti says that everything

is fine, but he told me things I must do, and among them is that I mustn't be bounced around by you."

"How about?" Louis asked, looking at the bedroom.

Margaret pushed him away, and started towards the kitchen.

"It's all right," she said over her shoulder, "but the doctor says to be careful."

"Come here," Louis said, "and let's get started practicing being careful." And he grabbed her by the arms again.

At 6 o'clock that morning they were awakened by the telephone. It was Peter. Ma Beretti was dying.

Louis didn't say anything, but started to get dressed. Margaret, rushing into her own clothes, felt a wave of sympathy for him. She knew that to all the Berettis, there was nothing so close as the blood tie. They might fight with each other, but none of them would tolerate anyone else even breathing a word against a Beretti. And she knew that, although none of them said it in words, Ma Beretti was the chief of the Beretti clan. Ma was the font from which the Beretti sons and daughters had sprung; and Ma was the rock upon which Beretti, the father, had stood.

They rode down in the elevator, skippered by a sleepy, and not too pleasant West Indian lad with the unique Barbados accent. Louis' car was parked out in front. They only hit the high spots on the way downtown—Broadway, Central Park, Fifth Avenue, Lafayette Street.

Ma Beretti was lying in bed, breathing heavily. She was being drowned by the fluid in her tissues, and smothered by the fat of her enormous body. But she was dying hard. She was conscious and in great pain. Father McCann, Dr. Fiaschetti and a nurse were there, and Pa Beretti and all the children.

"It will soon be over," Dr. Fiaschetti said to Louis. "She has asked for you."

"Hello, Mother," Louis said. "Here I am."

"Ah, Louis," Ma Beretti said in a faint, ghostly voice, her words coming slowly, "I wanted to see you before I died to tell you to be a good boy, and a good husband to that good girl."

"Of course I will, Ma," Louis assured her. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I am suffering very much," Ma said in her agonizing way. "And I will be very glad when the good God takes me."

Pa Beretti dropped on his knees at the side of the bed and began to weep. The house with all the improvements in Westchester was ready, but Ma never would see it.

Father McCann began to repeat the prayer of his church for the dying, and Ma Beretti followed him. Her voice suddenly was cut off as if a hand had been put over her mouth. She struggled for a moment with intensity terrible to see, and then fell back, her mouth open.

The priest crossed her still stained hands across her great bosom, and closed her eyes. The women began to cry audibly. Pa Beretti was racked with sobs, which shook and twitched his meager frame. In the midst of the mourners the imperturbable Peter lay upon a couch and began to snore. Louis looked at the hulk of his elder brother. "What can you do with a dumb bastard like that?" he mildly inquired.

In the kitchen where the nurse had a great pot of coffee ready on the stove, Dr. Fiaschetti said:

"That woman had to work to die. She lived a hard life and she died a hard death. But I don't think an easy one would have been fitting for her."

They had to lead Pa Beretti away from the body. He was in a daze.

"Your mother never saw the electric washing machine,"

he said to Louis and Rosa when they finally persuaded him to lie down on the sofa in the dining room.

According to grotesque and savage custom the unwieldy husk which Ma Beretti's indomitable spirit had cast aside was exposed to the gaze of the family, friends, and merely curious, for two days. Then it was buried with great expense, and painful ceremony, including a solemn requiem high mass.

After that was finished, Pa Beretti and Rosa went up to Westchester to live in the home that Pa had built for Ma. And Rosa used the electric appliances, and found them too much work. And Pa went in for gardening in a dispirited sort of way. The only real pleasure he took was that Fall, when he made barrels and barrels of wine in the old fashioned Italian style in his cellar.

The wine that Louis sold in his places always had been good because Pa Beretti made it.

"But I'd make more money," Louis told Pa, "if I sold the regular stuff—alcohol and water with a little grape juice to flavor it. It's cheaper to make, and the customers are more used to that stuff these days."

"But this is the good, honest wine," Pa said.

"Ha! Ha!" Louis replied mirthlessly. "I get wood alcohol that has had the poison cooked out of it, and I make good gin and cut good whiskey with it. And the other guys make good wine out of it. And it's that taste that the customers are used to. They know what they want. They want the good honest, bootleggers' stuff, and it's cheaper."

Louis was getting a bit fat, and a good deal of money was coming in. Also, a rather large stream of money was pouring out.

He liked to bet on the horses. That always had been a failing of his. And now that his income was bigger, he made bigger bets on the horses, and lost more.

The girls in The Cellar Door shined up to Louis because he was the big boss. He used to thwack them with an open palm over their buttocks now and then, and invite them to have a drink with him on occasion, but Kitty was the only one that he ever talked to much.

Kitty had brown hair and blue eyes, and cute, straight hung legs. She really resembled a kitten; she was so smooth, and cuddly and playful. She looked innocent but Louis was aware that she required no birth control literature to keep herself out of trouble. In the set in which she moved "safety first" was an important slogan.

If a girl was careless there were establishments run on scientific, surgical lines in which a mistake might be rectified with nothing more objectionable than to take a whiff of ether and part with $150. Everybody knew that. It was just part of living.

Early one morning after Louis had been married eight months, and after he had drunk even more whiskey and lost more money than usual on the races, he went to The Cellar Door. Peter's wife raised so much fuss about Peter being in The Cellar Door, that Louis usually spent most of his time in it himself, and, of course, Kid Quick was there all of the time.

Joe and Freddy Bergman and Sammy Oates, who drove for them, kept their cabs outside The Cellar Door. They took very good care of old customers; and didn't even bother to ask newspaper men for fares if the newspaper men were too tight, or too broke to mention the subject of fares on their arrival home.

But sightseers in New York who climbed unsteadily into the cabs owned by the Bergman brothers more often than not were astonished at the disappearance of their money and other valuables. The Bergman brothers were artists in their line,

and they never pretended to themselves that they were cab drivers.

On this morning in question, Louis was unusually restless. He didn't want to go home. He didn't know exactly what the hell he wanted to do. All he knew was that he wanted to do something different than what he was doing, and what he had been doing. His bright brown eyes lighted on Kitty.

"Hello Baby," he said. "Have a drink?"

"Sure, Boss," she said, and took him softly by the arm.

"You're a great kid, Kitty," Louis said. "There's something tells me you're wonderful loving."

Kitty looked up at him out of blue eyes a bit misty with alcohol.

"I might be able to learn to love a great big wonderful man like you if I had the chance, Boss," she admitted.

Louis tossed his head back, opened his mouth, and threw a small drink of whiskey into his saturated system.

"Come on, and get your clothes, then," he said. "Tonight's the night."

While he was awaiting Kitty, Louis thought of Margaret at home in the five-room apartment. She'd have his slippers laid out for him, and a bottle of whiskey and a newspaper on the dining room table. There would be a salami sandwich or something for him too. He felt the momentary twinge of an atrophied conscience. Then he laughed a mirthless laugh.

"What the hell," he thought. "It's better for the baby this way."

And when Kitty came sedately out to meet him, she was flattered by the really pleasant smile which lighted Louis' face. She didn't know that the expression wasn't for her. Louis was figuring that already he was being a thoughtful father.

CHAPTER XVI

Louis walked to his old place, the bar in back of the fruit store. It didn't make much money for him, the way he was figuring money these days, but every little bit helped, and many of his old acquaintances gathered there.

It was about midnight of a rainy April day, and there just had been a fire a few doors down the street. It hadn't been a spectacular blaze. In fact, there hardly had been any blaze at all. But some baled rags had gotten to smouldering in a sub basement, and chemicals stored there had fumed vigorously.

The first couple of firemen who had gone into the smoke hadn't come out. More had gone in after the first two. When Louis strolled past the scene the situation was in hand, but about ten firemen still were laid out unconscious on the damp sidewalk with ambulance surgeons working over them, and an equal number, rather pale around the gills, were sitting on the sides of the hook and ladder, or on the curb, each with a bottle of milk in his hand. Milk is the fireman's antidote for smoke.

"If any of you guys would like a real drink instead of that baby's food, just say the word," Louis said, recognizing some friends.

"Milk's the only thing those boys'll drink right now, Louis," a Fire Lieutenant replied, waving a half emptied quart bottle in his own smoke-stained right hand.

"Well, I'd be glad to buy," Louis said. "I gotta new son up at the house, weighed nine and a half pounds. Maybe I could send you around another wagon of milk, or some pap or something."

"If the smoke ever gets you, stick to milk," the Fire Lieutenant replied. "I hope the missus is O.K."

"Fit as a fiddle, and got enough milk for two calfs, let alone the kid," Louis said. "Right now I want to be the only bottle baby in my family. Well, so long. But any of you fellers remember you got a drink coming on me."

He turned in at the fruit store, and went in the bar. Hank Still was the only customer visible.

"Close those swinging doors," Hank said in an affected deep voice, quoting from a supposedly funny dialogue, which concerned a little girl who was pleading for her father not to spend all of his pay envelope on rum.

"It's my luck to have you the only bimbo in the place," Louis said. "Well, you'll have to do. I got a son up at the house, and all is well. What're you going to have to drink?"

"I'll have some champagne," Hank said. "It's the only beverage suitable for the occasion."

"This kid is going to have his health drunk in rye whiskey," Louis said. "And if you don't drink rye whiskey you're out of luck. I'm having a hell of a time being a father tonight."

"I guess Eddie and Mack are up at The Cellar Door," Hank said. "This place is all right up to a certain hour but after that it gets sort of dead. I don't like it so well myself ever since Ma died, and Pa stays in the country. I used to like to talk to 'em."

"Talk to the bartender," Louis said. "That's what he's paid for—to listen to guys' troubles. I guess I'll go uptown myself."

"And I'll go along," said Hank.

The Cellar Door was crowded. Mack Sloan and Eddie Briggs, and four other newspaper men were at a table near the service door at the rear of the room. They all had a drink to Louis' son, and then they all had some more drinks on general principles.

"Where'd she have the baby?" Mack Sloan asked.

"At the Lying-In Hospital," Louis said. "It costs dough, but they do it right."

"I suppose you were more trouble to the docs than she was," Hank said.

"What the hell," Louis said. "Everybody has to be born, don't he? I just lugged her around to the hospital when the doc said the time was ripe, and turned her over to 'em. My old lady used to have one of us between getting breakfast for the old man, and making the beds. Have another drink."

Margaret in bed in the hospital had just nursed her son, who had been brought to her by a nurse for the purpose, and who had been taken away again by the nurse when the purpose had been accomplished. Now she was lying comfortably back with nothing to do except think. And despite slight efforts, which she was inclined to regard as great efforts, to think of something else, a mental picture of John McGill, the red-headed slater and roofer, loomed large and attractive and romantic in her mind's eye.

Jack McGill might never make much money, and he might waste his time in pool rooms and speakeasies, but he was a romantic looking and a romantic acting soul. No one could deny him that. She remembered his resonant baritone, which he liked so much to use.

She was thinking that Jack never would have taken the birth of a son in such a matter-of-fact way as Louis. She could imagine Jack walking the floor until he got word that everything was all right, and then rushing in to her and taking her

in his arms. Thoughts that Jack might stay out a bit some nights only to smother her in affection other nights to make up for it, came to her mind, despite a strong feeling of disgust at her own disloyalty to Louis.

She had thought always that Jack never could be true to any one woman, but now she was wondering if, after all, Jack might be the sort who would not take a woman he married for granted, no matter what happened. He always would be romantic, if unfaithful, and repentant for his unfaithfulness.

The conviction came over her in a flood that Jack never would marry, now that she had become Mrs. Beretti, and that while there might be many casual women in his life, he always would consider that she was his real Fairy Princess, which, as a matter of fact, had been one of his pet names for her in other days.

There was nothing romantic about Louis. But he was dependable. He was strong, and self-sufficient. He drank a lot. He drank too much, as he admitted himself, but he had to drink a good deal, he thought, for business reasons, and then he had to keep himself up with whiskey. And he made money out of it. Jack wasted time and money on dissipation. Louis turned both the time and money to material account.

When Margaret was allowed by the scientifically conservative doctor to leave the hospital for home, she was normal in mind again. Fancies of John McGill that had visited her in her weakened state were forgotten. She was absorbed in the baby.

A few days after her return home, Margaret referred to the baby as Junior.

"Hey," Louis said. "That baby's name isn't Junior. That's all you hear the fat kikes out on the Drive calling their mutts—

Junior! The kid's name is Louis Daniel Beretti, and we'll call him Dan, after your father. We won't have any Juniors around this dump.

"And speaking of dumps," Louis continued, "we're not going to stay in this one much longer. I've been looking around over in Jersey for a house, and I saw one yesterday that I guess I'll buy. It's a damned good looking layout. I'll drive you over tomorrow to have a look at it."

"I'd like to have a house of my own, Louis," Margaret told him, "but I hate to get too far away from my family and my friends."

"Rats!" Louis said. "You won't be any further away from 'em over in Jersey than you are here. With the tubes and tunnels, it ain't as far to get to Newark or East Orange or any of them towns than it is to get to 180th street. And when you get there you got something. And I guess now I can afford another car too for you to ride around in. Things are looking pretty good with the business."

The next day, Louis took Margaret and his son in the car across to Jersey. A thirty minute drive brought them to the house in a new development in the Oranges. It was a cement house, bungalow style, with a red tile roof, ten rooms, three bath rooms, and a three car garage.

"I'm too restless to build any dumps for myself," Louis said. "And I might be dead before I got it built."

Margaret knew he was thinking of the Weschester house that Pa Beretti had built for Ma. Ma's house now was whatever her God had provided, although being merely mortal, Margaret was inclined to forget the durability of soul, and think more of the extra size casket in six feet of earth as Ma's resting place. She didn't even consider, which she might have, that Ma's God being a just God, probably had Ma perfectly

happy and contented by this time shelling peas, and scrubbing floors, and making tasty Zabagliones for breakfast.

If Margaret had a fleeting thought that Louis hadn't consulted her about a new home, she didn't mention it to Louis. She knew well enough that whatever Louis decided on in the way of a place to live was what they were going to live in.

"I think it's too wonderful, if we can afford it," she said.

"We can afford it now," Louis told her, "and we might as well take the breaks while they come our way. I'll never be a guy that saves much money, I guess, not being like the old man."

"We'll have to have some more furniture," Margaret reminded him.

"Yeah," Louis said. "I was talking to some newspaper friends of mine about that. I told 'em neither you nor me had any more idea about furnishing a house than I had learned in Chinatown, and you had learned on Third avenue."

"I've got good taste," Margaret said defensively.

"You may have good taste," Louis conceded, "but it ain't had much chance for practice. Anyway, I want to do this thing right over here, now that I'm doing it, so I told Mack Sloan's wife who is in the business of fitting up people's houses, to fix ours up so that it would look like a place anyone would like to live in. And she said she would have it fixed right.

"There's a lot of cracks in the newspapers about the way people who have been brought up eating off the kitchen table —when they ate—making a mess of themselves when it comes to fixing up a house. There's a lot of kidding nowadays about bootleggers, and the way they buy chromos and hand organs for the front parlor.

"Mack Sloan's frau says this is a good house to fix up, and she's going to fix it. She says the library is going to be homey.

Maybe we can bring up Dan in the library, and he'll be a college professor when he grows up. Only one thing I told her was not to put that green and pink paper in my bathroom. I was brought up on the Evening Journal, and I want to change gradual."

Margaret felt a sense of something missing when she looked over the house, and found it far above any of her ideas in that direction. And now when she learned that it was the choice of another woman, and that the other woman was even going to furnish it, she felt empty inside. She would rather have had many errors in taste and done the planning and shopping herself. She much would have preferred to have had a much smaller and cheaper house under those conditions. It would have been more like her own. But she didn't tell Louis that. What she told him was:

"You're wonderful, Louis."

"That makes me think of something I was going to speak to you about before," Louis said, carelessly, taking the adjective of praise for granted. "I'm no hog, even if I'm getting to look like one. It won't be long, I guess, when you can begin lovin' again, and I want you to see Dr. Fiaschetti about keeping yourself from getting in the family way.

"A wife has got to have some consideration, and I should say that a baby a year was too much to expect of any woman. My old lady got herself that way regular, and most of the babies died. And I always thought she might have been alive yet if she hadn't been so full of kids, and working so hard all the time. She musta been made of steel and concrete to have lasted like she did."

"That's Birth Control," Margaret objected. "And I always was taught that it was a sin."

"Well," Louis said, "it's something that every sensible family does nowadays. And I don't think you'll find you'll be fired

out of the church for watching your step. We both want a family, but we don't want 'em pilin' up so fast we can't keep track of 'em, do we? And you want to be able to enjoy life a little yourself, don't you? And I can't say that I'm one of those guys that has his mind only on making babies when he hits the hay with his frau."

"It doesn't seem right," said Margaret, who really felt very happy and tremendously relieved, and was nearer to really loving Louis that minute than she ever had been in her life.

"You gotta do it, Maggie," Louis said definitely. "You don't have to advertise it in the papers. It's just one of those things that the wise guys do, but don't brag about.

"I've learned a lot, even if I didn't go to school very long, from hangin' around with Mack Sloan, Eddie Briggs, Bill O'Brien, Hank Still, and all those newspaper men, not to mention some writers and lecturers and professors, who all seem to like their liquor just as well as cops and judges.

"They tell me that there was hell to pay when the first gent discovered the earth was round and tried to tell the common people about it. And there was more hell to pay when printing was invented so that everybody had a chance of knowing what was goin' on. And there always was hell to pay and always will be when common people are let in on what before was a secret of a few guys with brains and dough.

"Guys with dough need some ignorant bastards to do the work. Nobody wants to work, except dumbbells, unless he's working at something that really is fun for him. And then if he has to do that to earn a living it stops being fun and gets to be work. Probably I'd stop drinkin' if it stopped being fun and I had to do it."

"That's what you always said you drank for, Louis," Margaret told him. "You always say you drink because it's your business, and you got to be pleasant with the customers."

"I got to drinking too much anyhow," Louis said, taking a bottle from his pocket, and slowing down the car, while he took a drink. "I got myself over smoking opium, but it seems to me it's harder to get over this damned whiskey drinking. I shake like a pair of dice every morning when I get up."

"Why don't you just take a few drinks, and not take so many every day?" Margaret asked.

"Ha! Ha!" Louis laughed mirthlessly. "Ha! Ha! That's what they all say. They go on the wagon for a few days, and then when they start drinkin' again they say they are goin' to drink like gennelmen. I drank to be smart the first time, and then I drank for the kick, and now I drink mostly so I won't shake myself into a thousand pieces."

When they got home, Margaret went into the bedroom and left Louis and Dan in the dining room. She came back just in time to see Louis taking a glass of beer away from Dan's mouth.

"What are you doing to the poor little darlin'?" she demanded. "Trying to make him sick with that beer?"

"He takes to it like a bootlegger's son ought to," Louis said, proudly. "Hell! A little beer never hurt anybody."

"I suppose you'll have him drinking whiskey before he's a year old," Margaret said.

"My kids'll have all they want to drink right at home," Louis told her. "And if they want too much they'll get their backsides slapped."

"Oh dear!" said Margaret.

"Nuts," Louis said. "Look at what ministers' sons, and total abstainers' sons turn into. I got some of 'em for regular customers. The professors are preachin' these days that the best way is to let a kid try a few things while you know about it, without waiting for him to try 'em when you don't know about it. Believe me, they'll try 'em all."

"But you don't have to start giving beer to a little baby," Margaret said.

"Well, all he had was a taste," Louis said. "It makes you look damned good to get mad. I wish you'd go around and see Doc Fiaschetti tonight. I think I'll be home early."

As Louis rode downtown in his sedan his thoughts were pleasant.

"There ain't many husbands as good to their wives as I am," was his theme.

CHAPTER XVII

Louis was absent-minded and ran through a red stop light in Fifth avenue. The traffic policeman blew his whistle and Louis stopped. The traffic policeman walked slowly and portentously over to Louis and said:

"Where the hell do you think you're goin'—to a fire?"

"I wasn't thinking," Louis said.

"I'd be surprised if I heard a guy like you ever did think," the traffic policeman said. "Where's your driver's license?"

Louis produced his licenses.

"Louis Beretti," the traffic policeman said, in an entirely different tone of voice. "Be more careful, Mr. Beretti, can't you? You know how it is with all these damned Sunday drivers. And I'll be over to The Cellar Door to have a drink with you. I hear you got good stuff."

"O.K.," Louis said. "Come around and I'll give you a couple of bottles to take home with you."

"Thanks, Mr. Beretti," the traffic policeman said. "If I had brains I wouldn't be directin' traffic."

Louis forgot the incident as soon as he started his car again. He was driving a dashing roadster now. He was making up his mind to move The Cellar Door a block or so to a new location. He already had eliminated the girls and the dancing. He was concentrating on good food and good wines and liquors.

"I can have an iron gate," he was thinking, "and keep it locked, with a guy to let the right people in. And I can serve drinks at the tables without any bother. The waiters can serve cocktails out of the shakers, and I can serve champagne in freezers.

"Peter can run the old place all right, with John and the women in the fruit store."

Louis drove on contentedly, happy in the soft purring of his expensive motor, and satisfied to look like a man of substance. His lazy gaze took in the gorgeous shop windows, and the towering buildings with good humored tolerance. It was all a pretty good background for a man who had arrived.

And Louis felt just then that he didn't have much more than the average successful business man to worry about. He was backing on shares a profitable scheme to smuggle in alcohol from Holland. All he had had to do was put up five thousand dollars in cash. His profits in three months would be two hundred thousand dollars.

The Cellar Door was a gold mine. With his newspaper men friends as a nucleus, it had grown to be one of the gathering places for the night life of the town. Newspaper paragraphers and columnists, book reviewers, and actors and actresses, not to mention a number of politicians, were regular patrons.

Big Italy had come unostentatiously out of Atlanta, and was back in his own stamping grounds. Big Italy had had money when he went to Atlanta, and he had a lot more when he came out. He didn't have any conscience about white goods, as Louis had. But he never would try to sneak any more of it into the country himself. He would be satisfied with financing the business from now on.

But Big Italy was different from Louis. He still kept the old saloon under a fictitious name as a headquarters in the old neighborhood. He was just as quiet and self-contained as ever.

And he liked to stand at the battered bar, with his big cigar between his teeth, a bigger diamond than ever flashing prettily on the little finger of the left hand with which he removed the cigar now and then to say a word or two to a friend.

Louis stopped his car near Big Italy's place and went in. The old bunch was there. Even Joe Goodman was leaning against the end of the bar. Tommy Welch, Kid Quick and Jack Quinn were standing by. No one else was in the place, except Tony Lucca, the bartender, and ostensible proprietor. Louis tossed a fifty dollar bill on the bar and said:

"See what everybody'll have."

Just around the corner was another place which wasn't owned by Big Italy any more, but which was under his overlordship. This was a modern shock house. Drinks in there were two for a quarter. They were diluted recooked denatured alcohol. There were many of those oases in New York, but they never got into the headlines. The men who ran them were careful about the chemical analyses, and none of their customers died immediately and sensationally of the beverages sold. They took two or three years to die more or less comfortably, and in that period new customers were being groomed in all walks of life.

And the customers usually didn't die while they were patrons of the shock house. After they sank a bit lower they went over on the Bowery to live, and bought straight denatured alcohol from paint shops. That cost fifty cents a quart. Put a few drops of iodine in that, and shake it up until it turned a milky hue, and you had Smoke. Two-three shots of Smoke, and the drinker just sank down in the nearest doorway and went to sleep.

One day he didn't wake up, but merely was carted off to Potter's Field, which is a lovely spot, soft green grass, pied with daisies on Hart's Island in the East River. What differ-

ence did it make to the Smoke drinker if he slept in a long trench with numbers of other unidentified dead? He had drifted unidentified through life, and no particular benefit would have been gained by ticketing his remains. It certainly couldn't help him, and in many instances it might have embarrassed surviving relatives.

Of course, he might not be taken to Potter's Field right away. He might have a sojourn or two in the Alcoholic Ward at Bellevue. After a couple of sessions there, Potter's Field might look Elysian to even the most fastidious eye.

The gathering in Big Italy's took shock houses, Potter's Fields, Smoke, death and life in general all as a matter of course. They were discussing the fact that two policemen had just been around selling Three Star Hennessey Brandy at fifty dollars a case.

"If it had been whiskey, I'd a taken some of that," Louis said. "They offered it to me too."

"They were damned fools not to take $10,000 and let the shipment alone in the first place," Big Italy said.

"They thought they had a chance," Louis said. "But you can't sell brandy, and make any money on it. It don't cut."

"I couldn't sell a bottle a year," Big Italy said.

"'Lo, Louis," Tommy Welch said.

"When did you get out of the Big House, Tommy?" Louis asked. Tommy had just done a couple of years of a ten years' bit for a stick-up.

"Last week," Tommy said.

"What did you do for women?" Louis asked, grinning.

"I wished I'd a had your fat brother John there," Tommy replied with what was intended as a humorous smirk.

"What's John gotta do with it?" Louis demanded.

"Remember the time we all had the dame on the coal pile?" Tommy hastily changed the subject. "Those was the days," he

added, "before you got to be a big business man, Louis, and when Big Italy was thinkin' up somethin' excitin' for us to do every day."

Big Italy looked at Louis and gestured slightly with his head towards the back room.

"I want to see Louis alone for a few minutes," he announced.

Big Italy and Louis went to the back room, and sat down at a dusty table in the middle of it. As there was nothing else in the room, except battered tables and chairs, obviously long unused, there was no chance of their being overheard.

"Your old man still living up in Westchester?" Big Italy asked.

"He's dopin' around," Louis replied. "Let's have a drink."

Tony brought in two whiskeys.

"He's pretty well fixed, ain't he?" Big Italy inquired. "Got those tenements and the place up there, too, and the fruit store is all clear."

"He's got nothin' to worry about," Louis said.

"And your record's all right, and you're makin' money—that's great," Big Italy said. "You want to keep out of trouble."

They had some more drinks.

"How're the frau and the kid?" Big Italy asked.

"They're all right," Louis said. "Have you seen this picture of the kid?"

He pulled some papers from his inside coat pocket, selected one of them, and handed it to Big Italy.

"Great kid," Big Italy said. "It looks like you, too. You're sitting pretty Louis. You're keepin' out of trouble, and you want to stay that way."

They had two more drinks, while they discussed Louis' business plans. Then Big Italy said casually:

"I'm goin' to get Johnny French tonight."

"I'll go along," Louis said.

"No, you stay out of it, Louis," Big Italy said. "Haven't I always told you to keep out of those jobs? First it was your mother, and now you've got a wife and kid and a good record and a good business. You got too much to lose. You mind me, and keep out of it."

"Nuts!" Louis said. "You always tell me to keep out of it, but you always get me all steamed up on booze, and you know me when I'm all steamed up. You couldn't keep me out of anything. You get me all hopped up and then you tell me about Johnny French. And you know God damned well I'm goin' to be with you. You knew it when you tipped me off to come in here. Nuts! Don't try to kid me. Let's have another drink."

"You got me wrong," Big Italy told him. "You got me wrong, Louis. On the level, I don't want you in on this. But you're the only guy there is that knows all about me, and you're the only guy I know that I could tell this to. This ain't goin' to be any ordinary job. Johnny French is a tough guy."

"He's tough all right," Louis conceded, "but you'll see those bullets from the old army automatics don't find him any tougher than they find anybody else."

"This is the lay," Big Italy said, after Tony had put two more drinks on the table and returned to the bar. "Johnny is lookin' for me, and I'm lookin' for him. He ain't lookin' for me here because he knows I'll be ready for him, and the bunch is with me. He thinks I'm thinkin' the same way he is, and that I won't go up to his place.

"Well," Big Italy added, taking a fresh big cigar from his vest pocket, and lighting it with a patent gold lighter, the diamond on the little finger of his left hand sending off sparks, "I'm goin' to cross him. I got his place watched right now. And when I get the word he's there, I'm goin' up, and I'm

goin' in. And when I go in I'm goin' with a gun in each hand."

"It listens good," Louis said. "When do we go?"

"You don't go," Big Italy said. "You gotta stay out of this."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, shut up, will you, Italy?" Louis said. "We understand each other."

"Joe Bergman's goin' to drive," Big Italy said. "And I got Mamie up there with the guns in a handbag. We just walk in and let 'em have it, but whatever else we do we are sure that Johnny French gets his. The bastard double-crossed me out of twenty grand, and he's got it comin'."

Louis had a quick thought of his business, of his cash in the banks, of his home in Jersey, and his wife and the kid. An hour ago he had felt like any prosperous business man, doing well at the moment, but planning for the future.

But he couldn't get away from the bunch, from Big Italy and those early days. He'd kept his nose clean up to now. But how long could he keep it that way? Every emotional fiber in his heavy body clamored for the shooting ahead. But the business brain cells that he unwittingly had been developing whispered to him to go easy.

They whispered that Big Italy deliberately had planned to have him in on this, just as he already had told Big Italy. Big Italy, if he could help it, never had pulled off a job without Louis. Louis was a tiger once he smelled powder, or preferably saw the chance to land one of his powerful fists on a human target.

"It's all a chain," Louis was saying to himself. "A God damned chain that ties me to the place where I started. It looks like it was a hit-or-miss, but it's going right along with me, dragging me back with the bunch."

He knew the bunch would come running if he ever sent out a call for them. He knew all he had to do any time was pick

up a telephone and tell Big Italy to step on it, and Big Italy would step on it. And Louis' heart rather warmed as he thought of the bunch. They'd stuck together ever since they were kids. They'd robbed together, and smoked hop together, and chased girls together, and drunk together, and fought together. They were casual enough in greeting one another, but each one of them knew where the others stood.

All Louis had to do right now was take Big Italy at his word, and just wish him good luck, and get up and go out and have a couple of drinks with the bunch at the bar, and go over to The Cellar Door, or go home to Margaret and Dan.

But God damn it! That wouldn't be Louis Beretti. That would be some other guy. He'd gotten where he was because when he started the bar in back of the fruit store he was Louis Beretti, and no one dared bother him. They knew his connections. He was looked up to in his own world. There was an intangible something about him that caused dangerous persons, even cops, to treat him with respect. He had a reputation, an aura.

His Cellar Door, the pride of his life, was a monument to his reputation. The booze was on the level, and the food was on the level, and he was left alone by cheap grafters because of his connections which all grew out of his reputation. And his reputation was for being a loyal guy first, and a dangerous one second.

He could pull out of this mess right now, as his business brain cells advised, and he would be through with the bunch, except for a polite greeting now and then. His being through with them would be due to a change in a state of mind, mostly on his part. But he would be through, and free. But he wouldn't be Louis Beretti if he did.

A mental image, as clear as a photograph, was impressed on his mind of the roof on Mott Street, and Little Italy run-

ning off it into nothingness. His ear drums winced again at the heart stopping childish whimper that ended in a dull thump four stories below.

Louis was looking across the table at Big Italy during the few seconds that his mind was racing, and Big Italy was looking as steadily back. There always were three of them when trouble was in the air. And there always would be as long as the two of them lived.

Tony put his head in the door, and said, "Telephone, Boss." And Big Italy went out to the telephone.

"It's all set," he said a moment later. "Joe's waiting up at Sixtieth Street."

Late patrons at The Cellar Door early next morning saw Joe Bergman helping Louis, quite unsteady on his legs, up the outside stairs, and then on up the inside stairs that led to private dining rooms, and two rooms that Louis kept for himself on the third floor.

It was the first time that any of them could recall having seen Louis Beretti unsteady on his feet from alcohol. The truth was that Louis had a bullet through his right lung. It was a soft nosed forty-four caliber pellet. It had made a small hole going in, and a big one going out, having mushroomed to saucer proportions after the habit of its kind.

The roar of shots in the speakeasy, the tremendous shock of the leaden missile that had knocked him off his feet, the getaway with Big Italy into the car, and the quick shooting around corners, and his insistence on Big Italy's getting downtown, were confused memories to Louis.

He could see Joe thought he had got his. But Louis smiled grimly. He was tough as hell and he knew it. The shock of the bullet had numbed him. The only sensations of which he was conscious were a longing for a drink and a cigarette, and

a wild desire to scratch the bullet hole. It itched like the devil.

"Call up Doc Fiaschetti, Joe, and tell him to get down here quick," Louis said. "And give me a cigarette and a drink. There's a bottle and a glass on the bureau over there."

"Do you want a priest, Louis?" Joe asked, hesitantly.

"No, for Christ's sake! I want a doctor," Louis said. "I ain't going to die this time. I can feel it in my bones."

Joe gave Louis the cigarette, and lighted it, and handed him a drink of whiskey.

"I guess we got away all right anyhow," Joe said.

Dr. Fiaschetti came and patched up Louis' wound without any comment.

"We'll pull you around all right, Louis," he said, "but you've got to have a nurse. You're going to be pretty sick."

"Get Margaret," Louis told him.

"But she isn't a nurse," the doctor argued. "You really should have two good nurses."

"Now, Doc," Louis said faintly, "you know when it comes to doing what's right you should notify the police. I've got a bullet through my gizzard. But you aren't going to do it. And you know damned well I can't have any nurses around me. I've got to have Margaret, and she's the only nurse I can have. If I croak I croak, and we're all out of luck."

"All right, Louis," Dr. Fiaschetti said. "I'll call her."

Margaret had the first big shock of her married life when she arrived at the apartment over The Cellar Door and found Louis unconscious with the bullet hole through him. And she got her second, the biggest, shock when she read in The World later that morning that a gangster named Johnny French had been murdered, and two friends of his had been badly wounded.

She looked at Louis' bulk over on the bed. And she thought of gentle Jack McGill. She never felt any love thrills over

Louis after that moment, but she never had any very clear romantic visions of John McGill either. She had a most healthy and respectful fear of Louis Beretti. If she had only known it, Louis' sisters could have told her all about that particular sensation. It was a feeling that is guaranteed to keep most maids —and matrons—from harm.

Louis awoke in his right mind two weeks later, and looked around the room for a minute or two. He tried to sit up but his shoulder hurt, and he remembered.

"Dr. Fiaschetti says you've had a bad attack of pneumonia, but that you'll get well," Margaret said.

"Give me a drink," Louis said. "How long have I been here?"

Margaret held a glass of milk to his mouth.

"You've been unconscious two weeks," she said.

"Well, I guess I needed a rest," Louis said, and went to sleep again.

CHAPTER XVIII

"What was the name of that girl who was the sister of your swell friend that was killed in the war?" Margaret asked one morning when Louis was drinking his coffee.

"Louise—Bill Pedersen's sister." Louis said. "She married a feller named Boonton."

"Well," Margaret told him, "she's in a lot of trouble now—her baby has been kidnapped. It's all over the front page of The World. It makes me sick to think of it. I don't know what I'd do if anything ever happened to Dan."

Louis set his coffee cup down rather shakily. He had had a hard night, and his nerves weren't any too steady. Bill Pedersen had been a fine guy, but he was dead. A good many fine guys were dead.

"Whoever took the boy—his name was William, and they called him Bill—sent her a note to leave $10,000 on a stone by a bridge up there where they live in Westchester," Margaret continued. "Boonton told the police about it, and they laid a trap for the kidnappers, and they went by in a car, and shot the policemen. One of them is dead. Now Mrs. Boonton is prostrated. She thinks Bill has been killed, too. And her husband is frantic. There's a reward of $25,000 now for the boy, and it is expected there will be more during the day."

"He was a God damned fool," Louis said.

"What are you talking about, Louis?" Margaret demanded.

"That guy, Boonton," Louis said. "If any guys swiped Dan I'd leave the $10,000 for 'em where they said to leave it, and after I got Dan back I'd stick a few bullets in the guys. But I wouldn't bother the police about it."

"It's terrible," Margaret said. "I can imagine something how Mrs. Boonton feels. She doesn't know. That's the terrible part of it. She doesn't know. I think I would go crazy."

"I wouldn't have far to go to go crazy the way I feel," Louis said. "Is there any of the Mount Vernon left?"

Louis got up and went to the sideboard, and took out a bottle of Mount Vernon, and poured himself a quarter of a tumbler of whiskey.

"The first today—with this hand," he said. "I used to give Bill O'Brien hell for drinking so much, and now I'm beating him at his own game," he added.

"What are you going to do?" Margaret asked.

"Do about what?"

"Well," Margaret said, "you told me one time that when your friend Bill died he said something about you going to be a brother to his sister."

"Yeah," Louis said. "But Bill was dying—and a guy is likely to think of things like that when he's dying, I guess. And, anyway, for Christ's sake, what could Bill do if he was alive? I can't go up to Boonton's house, and walk in his wife's bedroom and kiss her on the forehead and tell her to cheer up, can I? Bill might do it, but I'd like to see me get away with any of that brother stuff."

"You know a lot of people, don't you Louis?" Margaret asked.

"For Christ's sake!" Louis said. "What has me knowing a lot of people got to do with this job?"

"You know a lot more people, I guess, than anybody knows

you know," Margaret told him. "I'm sure you know a lot more people than I know you know. I had heard some things, but I didn't believe any of them until I nursed you through the pneumonia."

It was the first time Margaret ever had referred to that episode: she hadn't dared, for some reason or other. But now, just as some sympathetic folk project themselves into the place of the murderer who sits in the electric chair for his crimes, and suffer agonies over him, Margaret had put herself in the place of the frantic mother, and was fighting to get her son back.

"What's that got to do with it?" Louis growled.

"It's got this to do with it," Margaret said. "You probably would stand a better chance of helping out that woman than her own brother ever could. He died in your arms, and told you to be a brother to Louise in her time of need."

"What's the matter with your head?" Louis demanded. "Do you want me to go out and butt into some other guys' racket?"

"I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do, Louis. But if it was your friend Big Italy that had told you to do something, I guess you would do it. And from what you have told me about him I should say that your friend Bill Pedersen was worth about five thousand Big Italies, and then some. And it was a dying wish too, when no one else was around. He was dying in a strange land and you were the only friend he had, and he told you to look out for his sister."

"The way you talk about it you'd think he knew his sister was going to marry this guy Boonton, and have this kid, and have the kid kidnapped, and so he was giving me the job of getting the kid back."

"When people are dying they may see into the future," Margaret said seriously.

"Oh Jesus!" Louis ejaculated, and took another drink. "But

what can I do about getting a kidnapped kid back, except maybe get pinched as the kidnapper myself by the cops? What do I know about kidnapped kids, for Christ's sake?"

"I wouldn't be surprised but what you might know who might kidnap a baby," Margaret said, which was about the bravest statement she ever had made in Louis' presence since she had married him. "You know a lot of strange people."

"Oh, I know some tough guys," Louis admitted, "but none of my friends are kidnappers."

"But Bill Pedersen——" Margaret began.

"Aw, shut up!" Louis said, and getting up from the table, he walked out of the room. "I'm going over to The Cellar Door," he called from the hall. "So long."

At The Cellar Door he met Bill O'Brien, as rosy of face as ever but not so smiling as usual.

"Just one drink this morning, Louis," Bill said, "and a bottle for the hip, and then I'm on my way to Westchester—that Boonton kidnapping case, and a damned rotten mess too. That's one bunch of guys I'd like to see electrocuted, I might even be persuaded to pull the switch on the bastards—kidnappers!"

"I'll have a shot with you," Louis said.

"The first today," he added a moment later, tossing down his drink.

"The first today—with this hand," Bill said automatically.

Bill had taken his first drink that morning with both hands around the glass—and his second and third ones the same way. He couldn't have held the glass in one shaking hand if death had been the penalty for failure. Now, however, he was in fine fettle. He could have held a thimble filled to the brim with liquid in either hand.

Bill lived on alcohol. He had hobnails in his liver, and his kidneys were gone. Doctors couldn't understand how he kept

alive. Bill had a theory that it was the alcohol that kept him alive. And the only thing on earth he was afraid of was running out of alcohol.

On the rare occasions when he was caught in strange territory he drank any kind of patent medicine that contained alcohol in respectable proportions. He had absorbed more jamaica ginger, Huxum's Tincture, and various so-called tonics than any other eighteen human beings. He was the only person of his acquaintance who, at a pinch, ever deliberately had drunk denatured alcohol.

"The bums on the Bowery get away with it," he said. "Why shouldn't I?"

Bill liked this assignment. Millionaire's son kidnapped; policeman murdered; big rewards offered; country wide hunt on for kidnappers, or child, or body of child. It was great stuff. And three other good reporters from his newspaper already were on the ground, working their heads off.

The Western Union was putting in special wires at Townley. Willy Penwhistle, who always had charge of big news stories for the Western Union would be there. Bill knew his typewriter would be awaiting him, and that if he were too drunk to hit the keys for the big story at night, that Billy Penwhistle himself would be glad to take Bill's flowing, glowing newspaper rhetoric.

A great newspaper reporter, Bill O'Brien, and none knew it and enjoyed it more than Bill O'Brien himself. But he enjoyed it in such a frankly boyish way, that everybody else enjoyed it with him. Everybody said that Bill could be a great playwright, or a great novelist, or a bloated bondholder or a motion picture scenarist, if he only would settle down to work. But everybody knew that Bill never would settle down to work. And none knew it better than Bill himself.

After Louis and Bill had had their second First Todays, Louis asked:

"How'd you like to have me drive you up there, Bill?"

"That would be great, Louis," Bill replied. "Nothing would suit me better."

"All right," Louis said, "I'll be the chauffeur."

"I have a rule," Bill added, "that the bird who drives me can't drink a drop of intoxicating liquor. Too many of my friends have been killed that way. So let's have one more drink, and then get started."

"We better take a half dozen bottles with us," Louis warned. "We might stay overnight."

"That sounds good," Bill agreed.

A few minutes later they went out and got into Louis' car, which was of the variety usually driven by bootleggers because of its rapid pick-up, and its speed on the road. But Louis never used his roadster for anything except legitimate pursuits. It was green, with a deal of nickel plate and plate glass glinting in the sun. It had mirrors everywhere a mirror could be hitched, and two extra spotlights of different designs.

"We will be secret when we get there," Bill said, as he walked around and climbed in the right side.

"We got nothing to hide anyhow," Louis said.

"Except seven bottles of rye between us," Bill reminded him, "and neither of us'll get mad hiding that. But you keep sober if you're going to drive."

Louis drove easily up Fifth avenue, and through Central Park, and up Seventh avenue and the Grand Concourse to the Boston Post Road.

"This bus looks good, but can she go?" Bill asked.

A minute later, he said: "Seventy! Hey, Louis I believe you."

Louis dropped to sixty, and a motorcycle policeman cruised

alongside, and motioned them to the side of the road. Bill took a hard look at the policeman, puckered his brow for a moment, and then said, with a broad Irish accent, which he always adopted when the occasion seemed to warrant it:

"Ah there Larry, my bhoy. And what are ye after doin' up on the Boston Post Road these fine spring days."

The policeman, who had been scowling forbiddingly, looked at Bill's red and beaming face, and said:

"The O'Brien! Well, of all the rotten luck. I suppose your newspaper is sendin' you on a chase after the President, and you've got to ride seventy miles an hour to get there."

"It's something like that, Larry. I'm on me way up to Westchester to cover the Boonton kidnapping, and I'm tryin' to hurry."

"All right, Bill," Larry said. "But sometime some of you newspaper boys down there may have to come across good for me. You're the second one I got today. Your big boss was doin' sixty the other way this mornin'."

"We'll fix you up any time, Larry, and glad to do it," Bill promised. "So long."

"I never had this car up here before," Louis said. "Most of the cops around where I drive know me, and I'm used to steppin' on it."

Bill took a drink from the bottle in his pocket, after Louis had refused one with a slight shake of the head.

"All right, Louis me bhoy," Bill said, now having adopted the Irish accent for the rest of the day. "Shtep on it!"

Headquarters of the newspaper men was in the Absalom Inn four miles from the Boonton home, where the DePuyster Boontons lived with Mrs. Boonton's father. Police Headquarters was three miles further down the road. The reporters all used hired automobiles, except Bill O'Brien, who used both Louis and his car.

By midnight of the first day, Teddy Hendrix, of The American, and Jack Gillette of The Times had joined Bill. They rode in the rumble. Louis merely drove them where they wanted to go. He had known them as customers for some time, and they didn't see anything strange in his being up there with his car. Nobody did.

He had driven Bill first to Police Headquarters, then to newspaper headquarters, and then to the house. Afterwards, he sat in the temporary telegraph room in a freight building next to the railroad station, while the newspaper men sweated over their typewriters, and the expert code operators bundled their stories over wires which ran straight into the various newspaper offices. "Loops" these straight connections were called.

"Get me a loop," from any correspondent was the signal that he had enough of a story done to get it going on its way to the front page.

Louis was mightily interested in the proceeding.

"They send commas and periods and everything, don't they?" he said to Penwhistle.

"They have to. It all goes press rate, and no abbreviations are allowed," Penwhistle said. "But these men sending here, and the men in the offices at the other end, are all experts, and they send it in code. They can send it just as fast as it can be typed at the other end."

After the stories all had been sent, except the one to The Tribune which was delayed because Hemple, of that newspaper, still was trying to write a new lead at midnight, the reporters all went back to the inn and most of them sat down for a poker game.

First thing they had done when they arrived was get acquainted with the local telephone central which happened to be two old maid sisters, the Misses Nancy and Lily Nash.

When they got through with the Misses Nash they knew that the Misses Nash thought they were fine, noble, hard working and generous young men, and that no news connected with the kidnapping would go over the telephone wires without one of the Misses Nash calling them.

Louis sat in the poker game, which was a dollar limit, with rangdoodles. That is, when some player held a full house or better, the limit was doubled. The newspaper men were good players, and Louis just trailed along a few dollars winner or loser. It didn't matter to him. His thoughts were elsewhere.

"Why the hell am I up here, anyway?" he thought. "Of all the God damned foolish things I ever did, this is the worst. What the hell can I do?"

But he listened to the shop talk of the reporters, which broke out spasmodically between pots. A Polish gardener who had been discharged by Boenton three months before was being held at the local jail.

"He's a dumb bird," Teddy Hendrix, who now had joined the crowd, said. "Of course we had to play him up in the stories tonight, but I don't believe he knows a damned thing about it. I talked to him myself with Chris Mixer for an hour, and we decided he was just a plain fathead. But the old Chief said he was expecting important developments, and so I had to write one of those important development stories with the poor Polack as the foundation for it."

"My three detective reporters are out looking for exclusive angles right now," Bill O'Brien said, grinning. "I hope one of 'em brings us a new lead for tomorrow."

"My office has Jim Sinker working on some clew in town," Teddy Hendrix said. "They told me over the telephone that they have something big up their sleeve."

When the poker game broke up about daylight, Bill and Louis went to their room, furnished with twin beds, which

they had gotten only because of arrangements made by the local correspondent for Bill's newspaper.

Both Louis and Bill were loggy with the drinks they had had all day, and didn't say anything while they were stripping, Bill down to the hide because he had brought his bag along with him, and Louis down to his underwear, which was no hardship for him.

Silently, they each poured a nightcap.

"The first today with this hand," Bill said.

"Listen Bill," Louis said.

"I'm listening," Bill told him.

"This business aint in my line," Louis continued, "but I've got an idea from listenin' in on you guys talk today."

"What is it?" Bill asked. "You're a wise guy, Louis, and if you've got an idea it might be worth somethin'."

"First," Louis said, "I want you to make an agreement that if my idea works out you won't say anything to anybody or print anything about it till I tell you."

"That's O.K. by me," agreed Bill.

"It's this way," Louis said. "This don't look to me like any job from this end. These guys out here in the country don't go sailing around in fast cars shooting up country cops—not that I've heard of, anyway.

"My dope is that you don't see anybody else tomorrow except this guy Boonton, or see him the next day, if you can't see him tomorrow. And you find out from him if he has had any run-in with any guys in New York.

"It might be such a little guy that he had the run-in with that it didn't seem like anything to Boonton. It might be some Italian guy around his offices. There's a cop killed with steel jacketed bullets out of an army forty-five. There's a mob in on this, and if you ask me they're in New York right now."

"You may be right, Louis. You may be right," Bill said.

"I don't like work myself, but I'll certainly have a long talk with Boonton tomorrow. Thanks for the tip."

"I hope it'll be some help to you, Bill," Louis told him.

But he was thinking he never would have shown even that much interest in the kidnapping, if he hadn't figured that he had to have someone who could talk to Boonton without exciting suspicion that Louis Beretti had any except the most casual—and drinking—interest in the affair.

Next noon, Bill and Louis arose, coughing and hawking up mucous from their irritated membranes, and taking their morning's glasses which wobbled perilously in trembling hands.

"You better make that date with Boonton," Louis reminded him.

"And how I hate to," Bill replied. "I'm no good at all at this time of day. I'm scared even to talk over the telephone. I feel as if the world was tilted up on end and was about to topple over on me."

"Nuts!" Louis said. "Pull yourself together, and get on the 'phone."

Bill got on the 'phone and talked with the Boonton home, with the Boonton office in New York, and then with his own office.

"All right, Louis," he said finally. "I got a date at 3 o'clock with Boonton. You'll drive me in, huh?"

"Boonton's been interviewed to death," Bill said to Louis on the way to town. "But I told him we were working on a theory and that we had a dozen men who aren't goin' to sleep till they find out what happened to that kid, and I said I had to talk with him. And I told my office I had an ace in the hole. But I gotta get back here tonight to wire the general story."

"It feels funny to be a detective," Louis said.

CHAPTER XIX

When they were approaching West Forty-sixth street, where the real estate firm of Boonton & Browne occupied an entire five story building just off Fifth avenue, Bill suggested:

"I know a damned good speakeasy in Forty-fifth street, just around the corner from where I'm going. Why don't we go in there and have a quick one, and then you can wait for me."

"O.K.," Louis said.

Bill led the way through a restaurant on the ground floor, through a kitchen in back of that, and down stairs into a big barroom, with three sweating bartenders working overtime to supply the thirst requirements of thirty or forty customers at the bar, and scores of other customers in a cellar dining room, just off the bar.

"Angelo's place," Louis said, looking around appreciatively. "I heard of it, but I never was in it before."

A stout, red-faced man, of about fifty, with graying hair bristling in a pompadour from a low, narrow forehead, asked:

"How are you today Mr. O'Brien?"

"I'm fine, Angelo. How're you yourself? Meet my friend Mr. Beretti, who's in the same line of business. Mr. Angelo, Mr. Beretti."

"What's doing, Mr. O'Brien?" Angelo asked. "Murder or a divorce, I suppose?"

"Not this time, Angelo," Bill said. "I'm working on that

Boonton kid that was kidnapped up in Westchester, but right now I'm down here to see the kid's father."

"That is very sad," Angelo said. "I know Mr. Boonton. He owned the building I had my restaurant in before this prohibition."

They had a drink of brandy, for which Louis paid.

"You go ahead, Bill," Louis said, "or you'll be late."

"We'll have one more," Bill amended. "And then I'll buzz along."

Louis and Bill had one more, but Angelo held up a protesting hand.

"If I did that all day, I would be dead by closing time," he said.

"That's why I'm always dead by closing time," Louis admitted. "I never did have any sense."

"So long," Bill O'Brien said. "I'll see you in an hour at the latest."

"What kind of a guy is this Boonton?" Louis asked Angelo.

"He is an aristocrat," Angelo said, "and he is very honorable in his business dealings."

"Couldn't have been someone that was sore at him over business then that swiped his kid," Louis said.

"I never saw anyone angry at Mr. Boonton," Angelo said. "Wait a minute," he continued. "There was one man, the bootblack who had a little stand outside of my restaurant.

"Everybody called him John, but his name is Guiseppi Vesalli. Guiseppi ran the bootblack stand, and did the porter work in my restaurant. And after prohibition he did the janitor work and ran his bootblack stand. But a chain drug store opened where my restaurant had been, and the drug store chain did not think it looked well for Guiseppi to have his bootblack stand outside, and they wanted a more up-to-date janitor than he was. So Guiseppi had to lose his stand.

"He was very angry about it. He used to shine Mr. Boonton's shoes, and he spoke to Mr. Boonton about it. But Mr. Boonton said he could do nothing except tell his manager to see that Guiseppi got another job taking care of the boilers in some other building in the neighborhood. But Guiseppi wanted his bootblack stand. Mr. Boonton was sorry but he could do nothing about it, and when Guiseppi got excited and began to talk in Italian, he stopped seeing Guiseppi.

"Guiseppi had had the bootblack stand for ten years, and he did not like to lose it because it made him feel like a padrone and not like a laborer. He had two chairs, and he did a good business, mostly with customers of my restaurant.

"After Mr. Boonton would not see him any more Guiseppi began to drink a great deal and get very drunk, and when he was drunk he used to say he would kill Mr. Boonton, who owned many buildings and could have let him have a little bootblack stand as easy as anything.

"But that was a year ago, and I have not seen Guiseppi since then. He disappeared from the neighborhood. I do not think Mr. Boonton ever realized how angry with him Guiseppi Vesalli was, because, of course, Mr. Boonton is a reasonable man, and he could not understand how an unreasonable man like Guiseppi Vesalli could blame him for something that was none of his doing.

"Me, I think Mr. Boonton forgot all about Guiseppi Vesalli five minutes after he told the people at his office not to let Guiseppi come in to see him any more. But I do not think Guiseppi Vesalli ever has forgot Mr. Boonton, who he thinks is the man that took away from him his beloved bootblack stand."

"Did you say anything to Boonton about Guiseppi?" Louis asked.

"Ah, no," Angelo said, spreading his arms out with the

palms of his hands down, and raising his bulky shoulders, and even the furrowed skin on his low forehead, in an expressive shrug. "It is not my affair, you understand, and it is only that you asked me if Mr. Boonton had any enemies that reminded me of Guiseppi Vesalli, the bootblack. Guiseppi may be polishing shoes at some other stand for all I know. It is just that it is interesting to speculate in confidence."

"Sure, Angelo," said Louis, knowing that Angelo knew a great deal of fact and fancy about him. Indeed, Louis understood that if it weren't for his own reputation for association with rather shady affairs, and his notorious discretion, Angelo would not have chatted with him about the missing bootblack. Speculation along those lines is not healthful in certain social circles of New York, some of them Italian.

"Let's have another brandy," Louis said.

"All right, Mr. Beretti," Angelo agreed, "although I do not as a rule drink brandy during business hours."

Louis and Angelo were drinking brandies, and discussing prices of alcoholic beverages, and methods by which one quart of whiskey may be made to grow into three, when Bill O'Brien returned.

"Whew!" Bill said. "That bird, Boonton is hard hit, and I don't blame him. I think I got a hell of a good story out of him, even if he has been interviewed before. I got some new dope on the kidnapping. But I didn't get any leads. Let's have a drink."

"The first today, with this hand," he said a moment later, raising his glass, and bowing, in his customary precise and exaggerated way, to Angelo and Louis.

"What did this guy Boonton have to say, Bill?" Louis asked.

"Well," O'Brien replied, "I got a good straight account from him about exactly what did happen the day the lad was kidnapped.

"Boonton himself was in his office here in New York. And Mrs. Boonton was out at an afternoon bridge. The butler, an Englishman named Parkinson, had a toothache, and he was in his bedroom on the third floor. Mrs. Smith, the housekeeper, was sewing in a kind of work room on the second floor in the rear of the house. There are three maids—the Boontons don't keep men servants except the butler inside—and outside there are two chauffeurs, one of whom was driving Mrs. Boonton while the other was in Greenwich, Conn., on an errand, a gardener and two assistants, who were working around the place, and four men in the stables.

"The nursemaid had just put young Bill, named after a brother of Mrs. Boonton, who was killed in France, to bed for his afternoon nap in the nursery on the second floor, on the south side of the house, adjoining the suite occupied by the Boontons, and had gone down to the servants' dining room on the north side of the house to have a bit of tea and a lot of gossip.

"All the servants agree that shortly after 4 o'clock in the afternoon, a few minutes after little Bill had begun his nap, Lucius, the police dog, who had been a puppy when Bill was born, and who was Bill's special pet, began to howl in the most ungodly way.

"Let's have another drink," Bill said, interrupting himself. "It's a funny thing," he continued, "that no one got that stuff about Lucius howling before. I'm going up there and take a look at Lucius and write a story for tomorrow with him for the big figure in it. Most everyone—except Arthur Brisbane—loves dogs. Jesus, but I'm glad I made this trip with you Louis."

"I had a good time myself," Louis said, "but you better be getting back on the job."

"Plenty of time," Bill told him. "Plenty of time. Well, it's

a funny thing, but sometime between 4 o'clock, and 4:30, when no one connected with the household was around to see, and while Lucius was howling his head off, someone went in and took the kid from his crib and beat it with him.

"Lucius was tied up, out of sight of the house, in the paddock. McMurtagh, the head groom, went to him and tried to quiet him, but Lucius wouldn't be quieted. After trying to pet him for a few minutes, and finding that did no good, McMurtagh untied Lucius, and Lucius made a bee line for the back road, which runs through the country a quarter of a mile from the rear of the house.

"The only signs there were some beaten back and bruised bushes and grass, some marks of tire treads where a car had been standing, and one of the blue socks that little Bill had been wearing.

"McMurtagh came up to that place, saw Lucius, who had stopped howling, but was whining anxiously, and caught sight of the blue sock. Then he ran back to the house, and in through the kitchen, and asked if Master William was all right.

"They all went up with Mary Dowd, the nursemaid, to the nursery, to find the crib empty, and the window open. There were marks on the window ledge as if a heavy body might have crawled over it, and the vines which cover the brickwork of the house were torn. On the other hand, the front door had been open, and there would have been clear sailing for the kidnapper, or kidnappers, that way. The situation on that day at that time was simply made to order for them. Boonton thinks whoever did it might have had the house under surveillance for weeks, or months.

"It was unusual for both chauffeurs and the butler to be away at once. He doesn't think it ever happened that all three were away and that Lucius was tied up. Lucius was a house

dog, and only had been tied on this occasion because McMurtagh, whom he would not obey as readily as he did his master and mistress, wanted to dip him in a mixture which was kept for ridding the dogs of fleas, and keeping their skins in good condition.

"Well, nobody knows any more than that about the kidnapping. The police have tried bloodhounds, as we know, and they've got two or three private detective agencies stepping on each other's toes to find clews. But Lucius is my story tomorrow unless I should find a straight news lead awaiting me when I get up there, which I doubt. Lucius'll make a great feature story.

"Let's have another drink, and then we'll get along back," Bill concluded.

"I'll tell you what," Louis said, after he and Bill had said goodbye to Angelo who, having been started, tried to get them to help him drink some champagne, "I'll send you back up there with Joe Bergman. I got something else to do, except chase around in the country with a lotta you newspaper guys, getting drunk because a kid has been kidnapped."

"Aw, come on, Louis," Bill said. "Your business can look after itself. Of course, we didn't get that clew you thought you might get here in town, but I got one whale of a good yarn from Boonton, and I owe you a couple for that. I'd have been too lazy to have seen him myself, and I might never have heard about Lucius."

"What the hell," Louis said. "I had a good time hanging around with you guys for a day, but enough's enough. I got a belly full. I'll drive you around to The Cellar Door, and if Joe Bergman ain't there, someone will be."

Joe Bergman's own favorite cab was at curb down the block from The Cellar Door when Louis and Bill O'Brien arrived.

"Drive him to Westchester?" Joe Bergman repeated, look-

ing at Louis with raised eyebrows. "He's working on the Boonton kidnapping case?"

"Well, what of it?" Louis said gruffly. "What of it, for Christ's sake? I drove him up there yesterday, but I got something else to do today, and I told him you'd take him. Go ahead."

"All right! All right! Sure, Louis," Joe Bergman said amiably. "Bill O'Brien'll be taken wherever he wants to go, but I got a date in an hour myself, and I'll have to get one of the other fellers to drive him. He can use the new touring car too."

"I don't care how you do it," Louis said, "only do it."

"O.K.," Joe Bergman said. "Jump in Bill," he said to O'Brien, "and I'll take you to the garage."

"What the hell is Louis doing in this business?" Joe Bergman asked O'Brien over his shoulder after they got under way.

"Louis and I were having a couple of drinks, and I asked him to drive me up there," Bill said. "Or he offered to drive me, I don't remember which. And we had a few more drinks, and played some cards last night, and he drove me back today. Now he's sick of it."

"He is?" Joe Bergman said. "Have the cops got any leads yet?"

Bill O'Brien began to tell the story of Lucius.

Louis Beretti went into The Cellar Door, and checked up on the business. After half an hour with the cash register, and five minutes with Kid Quick, who still was acting as his manager, he left.

He was thinking hard. Guiseppi Vesalli would have to be found, but God damn it, he would have to be found by Louis himself and by nobody else.

"I'm a sap," Louis was saying to himself. "Here I go and give myself a job of butting into some other guy's racket, and

I decide to go chasing after a wop bootblack. But Bill would have been with me on this lay at that.

"I can't let any other guy know what I'm doing, because I don't know what guys are in on this job, and I can't let anybody know that Louis Beretti has gone crazy, and is hunting kidnappers. I gotta do this job myself, and how I am going to do it, I dunno. God damn it!"

Louis was thinking hard, but he wasn't thinking too hard to notice that Joe Bergman was standing outside The Cellar Door by his taxicab.

"'Lo, Joe," Louis said.

"How goes it, Louis?" Joe said. "My date blew up."

"Uhuh," Louis said, but what he thought was:

"You never had a date you son-of-a-bitch, and I wonder why you got balky over doing a job for me all of a sudden."

Louis got into his car, and drove off without any more words with Joe Bergman. Joe Bergman turned his head and followed Louis' gay roadster out of sight in the traffic.

"What the hell is Louis bothered about this Boonton job for, I wonder?" he said to himself. "Although maybe he ain't bothered," he added, still to himself.

Margaret had dinner for Louis when he got home. Margaret always had Louis' dinner every day, and about once a month Louis got home to eat it. He never was surprised that the food was waiting; he would have been astonished if it hadn't been.

Dan was sitting at table in a high chair when Louis entered the dining room. Louis didn't kiss Margaret, or pay any other attention to her than to say, "How's tricks?" But he doubled up a huge fist and went through the motions of giving Dan a blow on the point of the jaw. Only the blow was as light as only the practiced muscles of a strong man can make such a tap, and Dan crowed with delight as his head was gently

prodded back by it. He beat on his saucer of cereal and milk with a spoon, and let cereal and milk drip from both sides of his chin.

"What did you do about little Bill Boonton?" Margaret asked.

"Nothin'," Louis said.

"What are you going to do about it, Louis?" Margaret insisted.

"Nothin'," Louis repeated. "And for the love of Christ," he added, "will you quit harpin' about that kid? You'll drive me nuts."

Margaret was silent for the rest of dinner, during which Louis drank a quart bottle of Pa Beretti's wine. After dinner, he picked up Dan, and walked into the living room. Immediately, discordant howls and moans, interspersed with men's voices talking, women's voices singing, and two different bands playing, announced that he was fiddling with the radio.

That night when they were going to bed, Margaret said:

"I never have bothered you before, Louis, about anything, but I wish you would try to do something for that poor woman who has lost her baby. We all are praying for him."

"You keep right on prayin', Maggie," Louis said, "and don't say anything more to me about it. I guess I'll take a hot bath."

When Louis came out of the bath room Margaret was lying silent in bed. Louis lighted a cigarette, and took two or three big puffs, before he tossed it into a patent ash tray.

"Listen, Maggie," he said.

"What?" she asked.

"Listen," he said, "don't you ever mention to anybody that you been talkin' to me about this case, or that the kid's uncle was a pal of mine."

"I never would," Margaret said.

"Well, you'd better not, if you know what's good for your-

self," Louis told her. "And that goes for everybody you know."

"I won't, Louis," Margaret assured him.

"And, Maggie, don't say any more to me about that kid then, because I'm tellin' you everything that can be done by anybody is being done to get back that kid if he's alive."

"Then——"

"Don't ever mention that God damned case again," Louis said to Margaret.

"I got to go bootblack hunting tomorrow," he said to himself just before he began to snore.

CHAPTER XX

"WHAT'S on your mind, Louis?" demanded Bill O'Brien. "What did you want me to come down here from Westchester for?"

"Have a drink?" Louis invited, moving over to the sideboard in the living room of his suite over The Cellar Door. "Have a drink first, and I'll talk after."

"Well," Bill O'Brien said, "I've always heard that a drink now and then doesn't hurt anyone. Make mine straight.

"Here's the first today," he added a moment later, pitching the contents of the small glass into his mouth. "What's the big idea, Louis?"

"You're not such a rotten tomater, Bill," Louis said, "and I may have something for you. First, you understand you'll tell nobody nothing until you get the office from me."

"O.K. by me, Louis," Bill O'Brien assured him. "What you got hidden up your sleeve—the kidnapper?"

"That's the bastard I think I got, Bill," Louis said. "But he's a tough baby, and I dunno. I can take the son-of-a-bitch and give him the works, and if he did the job I might find out, and I might not. If I gave him the works right, I wouldn't want to have that baby on my trail. I'd like to figure some way of getting that guy to talk without him knowing I'm trying to get him to talk. And the only way I ever knew of making a guy talk was to push him around a little, and maybe throw a bullet

or two at him, and not be too God damned careful about missing him."

"Who is this baby?" O'Brien asked.

"It's a wop bootblack named Guiseppi Vesalli," Louis said. "His customers used to call him John. Most everyone calls him John now. Guiseppi had a bootblack stand, but he lost it and he blames Boonton for losing it. I found the bastard down town in the Italian-American Gymnasium, which is another name for a wop speakeasy, in Carmine street. A friend of his who keeps a barber shop in the basement near where he used to have his bootblack stand started me on my way."

"How do you know this is the kidnapper?" Bill asked.

"I don't know it," Louis said, "the way you got to know anything in court. And I don't even know it yet well enough to kill him if it had been my kid that he stole. But if the son-of-a-bitch didn't steal that kid, I'm crazy. He is sore as hell at Boonton; he could cut his heart out, and eat it. He was a hard working guy all his life, and now all of a sudden he's drinking his head off. He's cock-eyed all the time, and mean as hell. It was easy for me to be a friend of his because nobody else will give him a tumble any more. I buy him drinks and tell him what a great guy he is, and I talk Italian well enough myself to get along. But what I got to do is figure out a way of finding out if this bum stole the kid or not, for sure. And he doesn't see anybody, and he doesn't go anywhere except to his room, where he sleeps in a ten foot room with six other wops in a stink you could slice thin, and have for sandwiches any time you was hungry."

Bill O'Brien was used to false trails. Twenty-five years in the newspaper business may not have given him a sixth sense but it had given him an uncanny faculty for knowing whom to believe. He very gravely had listened and very seriously had written of half a dozen suspects dug up by the police and detectives

without the slightest belief in his own mind that anyone of them was the man. His life had been spent dodging cranks, and running down baseless rumors. He was bathed in theories, and saturated in hunches. But Bill O'Brien knew Louis Beretti was no feather-brained individual going off at half-cock. Joe suddenly felt that Louis had the man.

Convinced of this amazing fact, O'Brien didn't jump in air and clap his heels together. Neither did he yell, "Hooray—a scoop!" He didn't do anything like that. He felt tired, and he knew he had a lot of work to do. He felt low, and dispirited, and he knew when the story broke, if it did, that he would have a lot of writing to do. Big stories to Bill O'Brien meant anywhere from seven to ten columns of type, banged out on a typewriter at speed. So the first thought that Bill had was that he needed a little drink to erase the tired feeling.

"Give me a drink," Bill said. "Got any Scotch? I'd rather have a good long highball this time."

"Sure," Louis said. "I've got everything anybody can get in New York right now, and I guess that's everything you could've gotten before prohibition that was any good."

"All right, Louis, in that case give me a good old suisette. This is a special occasion when I have to do some thinking, and something tells me that if you have a little absinthe, a little anisette, and a little white of a little egg, and can make me a not so little suisette, I'll think better, maybe because I'll be thinking that it's old times again and that Tom Crowley is still alive, and that I'm down helping the old bunch hold up the old bar in Lipton's."

"You big bum," Louis said. "I've got one bottle of absinthe here, but no anisette."

Bill compromised by taking another Scotch highball.

"Some morning we'll drink that bottle of absinthe," he said. "It's a great tonic for the morning."

"Do you think the boy is still alive, Louis?" he asked after taking a big swallow of the highball.

"I dunno," Louis told him. "All I know is that I've got a hunch that Guiseppi can tell all about it. And I don't know how to make him tell. I'd like to take the son-of-a-bitch by the neck and wring it out of him, but he's a stubborn wop, and he might not tell."

"A scientific third-degree," O'Brien said. "The only third degree the cops know anything about is a piece of rubber hose."

"Yeah," Louis said. "That's the only kind of third degree I ever got from 'em—only the rubber hose was a blackjack."

"Let's see," Bill reasoned. "Guiseppi must be a superstitious lad—believes charms ward off disaster, and looking at the moon over his left shoulder cures chilblains and things like that."

"What's that got to do with it, Bill?" Louis Beretti asked.

"I got the idea; that's what it has to do with it," O'Brien said cheerfully. "Give me another drink, and maybe I will get four or five more ideas, but I think this one is enough."

"What is it?" Louis asked.

"It's this," O'Brien said. "When the kid was stolen Lucius, the police dog, howled. Everybody remembers that, and maybe you remember I wrote a damned good piece for the paper about it too. Well, you stick right close to Guiseppi for a few days and be a regular little pal with him, and I'll fix it somehow to have a dog howl in the neighborhood every night. Guiseppi must remember Lucius howling, and when he hears this other dog howling every night, he'll think he's haunted."

"You're crazy," Louis said.

"Wait a minute," O'Brien replied. "You're buying Guiseppi drinks, and sleeping with him, and you're acting just as nervous as he does, and you don't have to act much at that. And

finally, about two o'clock some morning you tell him about some guy you murdered, and how it's bothering you."

"What's this about a guy I murdered?" Louis demanded.

"You just imagine it," Bill said. "You imagine you killed a guy, and are suffering remorse on account of it, and you tell Guiseppi about it, and Guiseppi tells you about the kidnapping, and then you wave a handkerchief out of the window, or something. We'll fix that part of it up when we come to it."

"Yeah," Louis said. "Then I wave a handkerchief out of a window. There'll be no handkerchiefs."

"Well," Bill O'Brien replied, "what are we going to do when Guiseppi comes through with this story? That's where I come in, isn't it, and get a big story for my paper?"

"Sure, maybe," Louis said. "If there's any story you get it. But first we got to find out about the kid."

"I suppose I ought to be thinking first of the kid," Bill admitted, "or of the kid's mother. She's nearly crazy—that woman—but she's the real goods. She's taking it like a thoroughbred."

"She's a good-looking dame, ain't she?" Louis said. "I always thought I'd marry a blonde, myself, but I didn't."

"A blonde? Mrs. Boonton's a brunette."

Louis put his glass down on the table, and looked at Bill. "You're crazy," he said. "She's a blonde."

"You're crazy yourself. Haven't I been seeing her right along? She's a plump little brunette, as pretty as they come, and class."

"Louise Pedersen was a blonde," Louis said.

"Louise Pedersen was a blonde, and she is a blonde," Bill said. "She's a cousin of Mrs. Boonton's. I've seen her plenty too."

"But the newspapers printed that the kid was named after a

brother of Mrs. Boonton who was killed in France," Louis said. "You said it yourself."

"Oh, newspapers make mistakes once in a while," Bill assured him. "I even make 'em myself. It was a mix-up. There were two Louise Pedersens, who were cousins, and the brunette Louise Pedersen married Boonton, and they named their kid after the other Louise Pedersen's brother."

"Ain't it hell!" Louis exclaimed.

"What's hell?" Bill asked.

Louis didn't say anything for two or three minutes. He hadn't wanted to mix up with this business anyway. Now, he wasn't even doing it for Bill Pedersen's sister. He felt rotten. He didn't know it, but he had felt rather good to be doing something for Bill.

Well, he thought, that takes the edge off it. But Bill was nutty enough to have seen the thing through anyhow. And now that he was started, he might as well go ahead.

"Oh hell," Louis said. "Let's have another drink, and talk it over."

CHAPTER XXI

"WHAT's the matter, Guiseppi?" Louis said, from his side of the iron three-quarters bed upstairs over the Italian-American Gymnasium in Carmine street. "For Christ's sake go to sleep. It's 3 o'clock in the morning."

"There's a dog howling," Guiseppi said. "I'd cut his throat with my stiletto if I could find him. Hear him now. Listen."

The sound of a dog's howl, apparently from across the street, came clearly through the single window, which had been raised with a deal of effort by Louis to let in July air a trifle less stifling and malodorous than that already inside.

"I don't hear nothin'," Louis told him. "Go on to sleep, you fathead."

"I can't sleep," Guiseppi said. "That God damn dog keeps me awake. Can't you hear him, Luigi? You must be deaf."

"For Christ's sake, I'll get you a drink," Louis countered. "Wait a minute."

He got out of bed. A single unshaded electric bulb near the pine bureau had been left burning. Guiseppi didn't like to sleep without a light. Two empty bottles, and a third partly filled with whiskey stood on the bare top of the bureau, which was scorched from burning cigarette ends, stained with spilled alcoholic liquors, and littered with burned matches, cigarette stubs, ginger ale bottle caps, and gnawed remnants of sandwiches.

"That God damn dog," Guiseppi said. "I'll go crazy."

"Wait a minute," Louis said. "Your nerves are all shot from drinking too much, just like mine are."

He poured two big drinks, and handed Guiseppi his glass.

"Shoot that into yourself, Guiseppi, and you'll feel better," he added.

"Here's the first today—with this hand."

Louis went back to the bed and lay down again. For about fifteen minutes Guiseppi rolled and tossed and cursed incoherently. Then he snored. After he had snored for a minute or two, Louis shook him. Guiseppi jumped as if he had been touched with electricity, and landed in his dirty flannel union suit in his hole-perforated socks on the matting covered floor.

"What's the matter?" he said. "Jesus! I am going crazy."

"I heard that damn dog, and I didn't know you were asleep," Louis said.

Guiseppi went to the window and looked out. No sound came up from the street except the rattle of a milk wagon, and the clatter of a newspaper delivery automobile. But fog horns were sounding out on the river. It was a stifling morning, and a blanket of mist was pressing the sticky warmth down around their throbbing heads and sweating bodies.

"I can't sleep," Louis said. "Let's have another cigarette and a drink."

Guiseppi was about five feet two inches tall, and very wide. He hadn't shaved for two or three days, and his beard was black on gaunt cheeks. His mustache curved and twisted out beyond his prognathous jaw. His black eyes under brows like tents were rolling in reddened circles.

The gnarled hand which he reached out for the cigarette and the other hand in which he took the drink were shaking.

"This'll make you feel better, Guiseppi," Louis said. "Whiskey is a man's best friend."

Four days later, Louis and Guiseppi each in his underwear were sitting at a table in a bedroom in a lodging house in Philadelphia. They had a bottle of whiskey and two tumblers. Guiseppi was talking to himself unintelligibly. A dog howled somewhere outside.

Guiseppi picked up his glass and jumped to his feet with the same motion, sending his chair flying. He threw the glass at the wall, and would have thrown the bottle after it, if Louis hadn't grabbed it in time to save it. Guiseppi swore hysterically.

"I could cut that dog's heart out," he sobbed, reaching with hairy fingers for an imaginary throat.

"I thought you'd get away from the dog down here in Philly," Louis said. "For Christ's sake, don't waste good whiskey just because you've got the willies. Here, have a drink."

"I drink, but it does no good," Guiseppi said. "My lips they burn when the drink touches them; and my mouth feels like fire when the drink touches it, and my throat burns, and it is like a hot coal when the drink hits here," and he touched his stomach dramatically. "And I feel I am going crazy with no sleep and the dog that comes and howls. I would like to see that dog once. I would carve him in one thousand pieces."

"I got troubles too, Guiseppi," Louis told him. "And if I wasn't a friend of yours you would be alone. Maybe you don't want whiskey then, and you want me to go."

"Ah, no, no," Guiseppi said. "I don't want you to leave me, my friend Luigi. And if I did not have the whiskey now I would die."

Guiseppi began to sob convulsively, and beat with both hands on his chest, blue-black with a mattress of hair, which showed where buttons were off the union suit, originally gray, but now brown from use.

"Have a drink," Louis suggested. "Listen," he continued, after they had their glasses in hand, "I got a plan. There's a

dump I know on the Jersey Coast here. I used it already in my business, which I've never told you is stealing booze from bootleggers. I wouldn't tell you that now only we are pals, and have got to stick together."

"We are brothers, Luigi," Guiseppi said.

"Well, we can get away from that dog that's bothering you —although I guess you're dreaming about him most of the time," Louis said. "There's only one house down there on the sand, and there ain't any place for a dog to hide. And there may be a job for us to keep us busy in the bargain."

"I will shoot the dog and I will cut him in a thousand pieces," Guiseppi said. He arose and went over to the bed and felt under the pillow where he kept his revolver and his stiletto.

"I wish you wouldn't keep those things around, Guiseppi. I'm always afraid that when you're having one of those nightmares of yours that you'll think I'm the dog. Jesus! I'm just as bad off as you are."

The night was dark with no moon. A northeaster had stirred up the invisible sea, which made its presence felt by the heavy moisture of its salt breath, and the sound of its sullen pounding on the sand.

What daylight revealed as nothing but a two-story, unpainted frame house, shaped like a box, took on at this hour the semblance of a mysterious one-eyed monster crouched in the gloom, trembling under the assaults of the wind, and dripping as with terror sweat from the spew of surf.

The eye was a window. A yellow shade prevented the illumination from lightening the darkness outside, and increased rather than diminished an illusion of mystery.

"A fine place for a murder," Bill O'Brien said to himself, as he staggered through the sand. "I hope to God that this ends the job."

He pulled a bottle from his pocket and took a drink. "I'll be going goofy myself, if this keeps up," he told himself.

Bill O'Brien was a hardened person, if there ever was one, but he also had an alcoholic's trick of visualizing strange shapes in the darkness. He had seen a train wreck in a corner of his bedroom on one occasion, and on another had watched with sardonic interest a camel make faces at him over the foot of his bed.

Now, the house on the sand crouched as if to spring. He could see it crouch in his mind's eye because his real eyes couldn't see the contours of the structure at all. He had seen it in the daytime, and knew it was nothing but a plain old shack, standing alone on the beach. But now it took on all sorts of fantastic shapes, and moved.

And the ocean on the other side of it from him was a monster clawing and eating at the beach. In a moment it would reach out its salty arms like a world embracing octopus, and lap up this menacing form of the house and him.

The wind was howling, and moaning, and the waves on the beach were sobbing and hissing, and gurgling; and Bill O'Brien, who couldn't really see anything except the yellow blur of the eye of the house, saw more weird phantasmagoria than he ever would admit he could remember.

"Oh Jesus!" Bill said, and said it reverently. And he took another drink from the bottle.

"I know I'm only imagining all this," he reassured himself, "but Holy Cats! It's a tough spot for anybody, let alone a chap who's full of hooch. But, by the same token," he added, as he reached the structure itself, and felt for a door in its latticed underpinning, "I'd rather have this job than be upstairs like Louis with that Guiseppi gent."

Bill found the door and opened it. "Oh God!" he said, as he bumped his head on a beam, and tore his trousers on a nail.

"Oh God! If I ever get out of this alive, I'll never take another drink."

And Bill meant it from the bottom of his heart. But he took out the bottle and had a drink because he needed it badly at the moment.

In the larger of two rooms which occupied the first floor Louis and Guiseppi sat and drank by the light of two gasoline lanterns. Guiseppi took a drink, and gasped as the hot fluid ran down the channel, seared by hundreds of other drinks, from his mouth to his stomach. He crossed himself as the gale rattled a loose shingle.

"I am going crazy, Luigi," he said for the thousandth time. "What did we come to this place for?"

"To get away," Louis replied. "I wanted to get away, and I thought you wanted to get away too."

"What do you mean get away? Get away from what, Luigi?" Guiseppi said, wrinkling his low forehead over bloodshot eyes. Spittle was running down his unshaven jaw, and he looked as mad as it is possible for any human being to look.

"That damned dog has been following you," Louis explained, getting up from a box on which he had been sitting, and walking to the door, where he stopped as if listening. "And I'm afraid they may be after me."

"After you for what, Luigi?" Guiseppi asked, relaxing a trifle, and unwrinkling his forehead slightly.

"I wasn't going to tell anybody, Guiseppi," Louis said, "but you and I have been pals now for three weeks. I croaked a guy, and it's on my mind. Sometimes I see him when I'm going to sleep, and sometimes I see him after I get to sleep."

Louis was thinking: "If I saw all the guys I've killed or helped kill, this is the last place I'd come to look 'em over. I'm about fed up on this."

Guiseppi went to the bottle which was on one of several

boxes. These, and a table piled with mouldy bedding, were the only furniture in the room. He poured a drink with a shaking hand.

"How did you kill him?" Guiseppi asked.

"He did me a dirty trick," Louis replied. "I had a fruit store over in Greenpoint, and he got the fruit store away from me."

"Ah," Guiseppi said, nodding his head excitedly. "That was good. If a man does you a dirty trick you have got to get even with him, with a knife if there is no other way. How did you kill this man?"

"I cut his throat. I sneaked into his house one night and I cut his throat. The windpipe and everything stuck out afterwards. And I've been afraid ever since that they are after me."

Guiseppi was silent for a minute. Louis again went to the door, and stood as if listening. He turned when Guiseppi snarled, and said:

"I killed someone too, Luigi."

Louis didn't look surprised. He didn't show any emotion at all. He just looked at Guiseppi with his burning eyes, bloodshot now, and tired, but still retaining their old-time boring quality.

"Well, that makes us even, Guiseppi," Louis said. "You killed a guy and I killed a guy, and we're both afraid we'll be caught. And we both know what we did, so we ought to feel better."

"I killed a little boy up in Westchester," Guiseppi said. "I didn't mean to kill the little boy first, but when I got him out of his bed he wanted to cry. I said: 'You shut up or I'll choke you.' And I choked him just a little.

"But the little boy started to make a noise again when I stopped choking him, and so I choked him again. And I said, 'If you don't keep still, I'll choke you.'

"And that time I was afraid I would be heard, and I was mad, and I choked pretty hard. When I stopped choking him I

had carried him from the bedroom where he was in a little bed down to the front door. And down there, I took my hand from his throat, and he was making a funny sound in his throat, and his face was blue. I thought he would be quiet. So I ran to some woods where some friends of mine had an automobile. And there was a dog barking.

"I was coming to the woods when the boy started to try to call again, and this time I said, 'I will choke you so you will not call for anybody.'

"And I was so mad that I saw all red and I put both my hands around that little boy's neck and I did to it just like I used to do to the chickens at home. I twisted his neck all around, and then when his head was hanging down I was so mad because he had made me mad that way that I hit the little boy with my fists in the face, and I was kicking him with my feet when Mr. Bergman who was driving me up there came and stopped me. He said, 'Now you have gone and done it, you crazy wop. You have killed the poor kid.'

"But there was nothing for Mr. Bergman to do. That little boy was dead, and I was so mad I didn't care if he was dead. That little boy's father'd taken away from me my bootblack stand, and he has a million dollars and I only had my bootblack stand. But I don't like it now that I killed the little boy. I wish I had killed the father with my stiletto. I wish I had killed the mother. I wish I had burned down the house. I could kill them all for getting me this way."

Guiseppi Vesalli's voice raised to a shriek, and he clawed with his dirty-fingered, hairy hands in the air.

"And that dog that barks all the time wherever I go. I think I am crazy or I am haunted. I see that little boy's face, which was all blue and swelled up when I put him in the bag."

"In a bag?" Louis said.

"In a bag like you carry potatoes in that Joe Bergman had

in his car full of bottles of ale. We put that little boy in the bag with big stones and we drove until we came to the water, and we threw him in."

"All right," Louis said, distorting his face in his old muscular smile. "All right, Guiseppi. We better have a drink after that."

They had their drink, and sat looking at each other. Louis was thinking, "What the hell! What am I going to do about this bastard? I don't want to sleep with him now he knows I know what he's done."

Louis couldn't tell what Guiseppi was thinking, but he thought it wasn't impossible that Guiseppi was beginning to regret telling him about murdering Billy Boonton. Guiseppi's reddened eyes were fixed on Louis in a strange stare, at the same time that his head was cocked to one side, as if listening to some sound far off.

"What do you hear, Guiseppi?" Louis said.

Guiseppi shook his head slightly, and then such a look of mingled craft and malice and intended dissimulation came over his features as never adorned the face of any sane person.

"I can hear voices," Guiseppi said. "I can hear voices away off. They are after me."

Louis fixed his features again in a frozen smile. Louis was hard, but he was human. "This bastard has gone nutty now," he told himself. "And this is going to be a nice party."

"Can you hear them?" Guiseppi asked.

"Sure," Louis said. "I've heard 'em for some time. I wondered if you did too. What do you think we better do about it?"

Guiseppi slipped his hand in his pocket and pulled out his revolver. Louis' smile tightened an indiscernible trifle.

"Have another drink, Guiseppi," he said, "and you'll feel better."

"I'll never feel any better," Guiseppi answered, pulling at his collar with his left hand. "And you're laughing at me, Luigi. You're laughing at me now."

"I got nothing to laugh about," Louis said steadily. "Don't be a damn fool, Guiseppi. Don't you know your only friend? Have a drink, and forget it."

Louis picked up the bottle and poured two drinks, Guiseppi watching him with his head bent slightly to one side as if listening. Spray from the roaring surf spattered on the house; the wind whistled shrilly as it went screaming by. But Louis didn't hear those natural sounds. All he heard was the roar of the gasoline under pressure in the two lamps, and the suck of Guiseppi's quick drawn breath in his throat. Louis would have given a hundred thousand dollars if Guiseppi had been near enough to knock down with a blow.

"Here's your drink," Louis said moving towards Guiseppi.

Guiseppi pointed the revolver at Louis.

"Keep away, Luigi," he yelled, his voice cracking. "You keep away from me now."

"Aw, take your drink," Louis said. "Take your drink, and then we'll have a good sleep. That's what we need. There won't be any dogs to bother us here."

Guiseppi was reaching for his glass, more because of custom than anything else, when suddenly the familiar howl of a dog sounded from beneath his feet.

The nervous reaction of Guiseppi's arm threw the glass smashing against the ceiling. Screaming with rage and terror, Guiseppi turned his revolver down to the floor and fired five shots at the sound. He fired them so fast that they sounded like the roll of a snare drum.

The howl of the dog ceased abruptly. In the instant of stunning silence that followed, Guiseppi yelled:

"I killed him. I killed him. I kill everybody."

He turned the revolver at Louis who already was stepping swiftly towards him, and fired another shot. The hammer clicked. The chamber was empty.

Guiseppi pulled his stiletto, and then put his head back and shrieked with laughter.

"Kill!" he shouted, and stabbed at Louis with the shining steel.

Instead of dodging, Louis twisted his bulky right shoulder into the point, and swung a terrific uppercut with his left hand at the same instant.

Guiseppi straightened up on his heels, and staggered back. Unmindful of the right arm, which had been slashed to the bone from elbow to shoulder, Louis swung again with his left hand, this time starting the punch about a foot from the floor.

Bone crushed against bone with a sickening crunch. Guiseppi, his jaw broken, sailed backwards into one of the lanterns, upsetting the box on which it stood, and landed in a welter of broken wood and flaring gasoline.

Louis didn't waste a glance on him. He knew he had driven the middle knuckle on his left hand half way up his wrist, and he knew he was bleeding like a pig from the knife wound in his right arm, but he wasn't worrying about those details at the moment. What of Bill O'Brien downstairs?

Louis went out the door into the wind and spray of the night, and called:

"Hey, Bill!"

There was no answer.

He ran around the house toward the opening in the lattice. It was so dark he couldn't see anything. But suddenly he felt Bill, and in an upright position.

"Why the hell didn't you answer me?" Louis said.

"Jesus!" Bill said faintly. "I've been vomiting my guts up."

"What's the matter?" Louis said.

"When that bird fired through the floor," Bill said, his voice gathering strength, "I don't think he missed me by more than an eighth of an inch. He singed my nose, and when I got to the door here I was sicker 'n' I've ever been in my life. I'll take an oath never to howl again. Where is the bastard?"

"He won't bother anybody any more, I guess," Louis said. "We had a fight up there, and the shack's on fire, and he's in it."

"Dead?"

"I guess he isn't as lively as he was," Louis said. "But instead of talking your head off, for Christ's sake tie up my arm, will you? It hurts like merry hell."

Bill O'Brien took a flashlight from his pocket, and got one look at the arm.

"I feel as if I was going to be sick again," he said.

"You'll be sick if you don't fix up that arm," Louis told him. "You tie a necktie, or a handkerchief around it, and stick a stick in it and twist it. And be damned quick about it."

Bill pulled off his necktie, and followed Louis' instructions. By the time he had finished making a tourniquet, the shack was ablaze, fanned by the strong wind.

"Where you got the car?" Louis asked.

"Over on the Old Point road where you told me to leave it," Bill replied. "I got a young chap from the office driving it. But I left him there."

"All right," Louis said. "Let's be getting along."

"Oh baby!" Bill said, as they were trudging through the sand. "What a bear of a story! Oh baby! You've got to tell me everything that happened."

"Say, Bill, have you gone crazy too? There won't be any story about this, and besides that you won't ever say a word about it to anybody. This is our private story. Get me."

There was a chill quality in Louis' voice that Bill never had

noticed before. He was no coward. He had stuck to his post even if he was helpless. But he didn't like Louis' voice.

It suddenly occurred to him that the whole business of Louis' participation in the hunt for the kidnapper had a queer angle. And now it was true enough that Louis had killed a man, but who would know that the man he had killed was guilty or not? Many other points arguing against saying anything about the adventure crowded Bill's mind.

"O' course, Louis," he said instantly. "I'm so all hopped up, I haven't got any sense. But do you know where the boy is?"

"We got a tough job ahead," Louis answered. "The kid is dead, and how in hell are we going to let his old man and his mother know about that?"

Bill stopped short, checking Louis with him. The house back on the beach was flaming high, the roar of its burning mingling with the rage of the northeast wind.

"Listen Louis," Bill said. "Let's have a drink."

"The first today," said Louis Beretti.

CHAPTER XXII

"It's this way," Bill O'Brien said. "We got to find out some way of letting the Boontons know that their son is dead. That'll hurt 'em, but it'll be a kindness in the long run. Next, we ought to find a way of letting 'em know the murderer is dead. As Christians, it shouldn't make 'em feel any better, but as ordinary human savages I'll bet it would."

"Yeah," Louis Beretti said. "But how are you going to do it? I got to be kept out of this."

"You've got to be kept out of it," O'Brien agreed. "And there's the rub."

"It's a rub then," Louis admitted.

He was sitting in an arm chair in his room over The Cellar Door, with his right arm in bandages. He was holding a highball with his left hand, swollen into a puff ball as a result of a broken knuckle.

Louis hadn't said anything to Bill about his acquaintance with Bill Pedersen, or with Mrs. Boonton. And Bill, who was humanly curious as to the reasons for Louis' interest in the kidnapping, hadn't quite felt like asking Louis any questions. Louis Beretti wasn't the sort of person of whom it was easy for anyone—even a policeman—to ask personal questions.

"I might persuade my paper that I knew the kidnapper was killed," Bill began dubiously.

"Yeah—you might," Louis said.

"I might go to Boonton and tell him enough of the truth to convince him," Bill said, without much sincerity in his voice.

"Yeah, you might do that too," Louis agreed.

"But the trouble is," Bill agreed, taking a long drink from his highball, "that I can't say who killed the kidnapper, and I can't even prove that he was the kidnapper. What the hell can we do about it?"

Louis didn't answer. He was thinking along the same lines himself. He hated to leave a job before it was finished. If it hadn't been against his code ever since he could remember to keep his nose out of other persons' affairs there was a possible solution. He could ask Joe Bergman where the body had been dumped. Recovery of the body would prove the kid was dead. The same anonymous note that told where the body might be found could carry information that the murderer had been killed.

However, Louis couldn't ask Joe Bergman any questions about Bill Boonton's kidnapping. It was none of his affair. Louis didn't believe in kidnapping as a business, any more than he believed in blackmail, or in junk peddling as businesses. But his best friends engaged in one or all of these enterprises on occasion. What they did didn't concern him.

"I'm in a hell of a boat," O'Brien said. "I've got the biggest story in the world under my vest, and I can't print a line of it."

"The hell with the story," Louis said. "I wish we could swipe another kid and give it to that dame. Let me think a while, will you, Bill?"

"I couldn't print what I'm thinking, and there's no money for me in that kind of thoughts," Bill said.

"Shut up," Louis told him.

Louis sat for fifteen minutes staring straight ahead. Louis thought in exactly opposite terms from Bill. He thought to an

end that was secrecy; and Bill always thought to an end that was publicity.

Louis might tell Louise Pedersen himself, but he never had trusted a woman with a confidence, and he wasn't going to begin doing it now. He could see only one way out.

"Listen Bill," he said finally. "Guiseppi said he put the body in a bag and threw it in the water. Now he may have thrown it in the nearest water there was to the house—not the puddle in the front yard—but the nearest water where anybody'd think there might be a chance of hiding a body.

"You tell your paper that you know in a way that makes it dead certain but that you can't tell anyone about, that this boy was killed and thrown in the water. And you get yourself sent up there to fish for it. If you're lucky, it's O.K. The Boontons know the kid is dead, and you got a big story. If you ain't lucky I've still got a bum arm and a bum hand, and the shakes from drinking too much booze."

"I might try it at that," Bill said.

A week later The World told in great headlines of the discovery of William Pedersen Boonton's body; and also said that information in the underworld was that the kidnapper had been killed.

With a first edition of The World in his pocket Louis went home to Jersey for the first time in a month. He walked into the living room where his wife was sitting, and said:

"Hello, here's a morning paper."

"Oh, that poor boy was killed, and they've found the body," Margaret said.

"Where's Dan?" Louis said.

"I feel so sorry for his poor mother, but it is better for her to be sure he is dead than to be worrying about him for the rest of her life," Margaret said.

Louis turned into the hall and walked upstairs and went into Dan's bedroom. Dan was there in bed, a toy bear on one side of him, and a toy elephant on the other. Then Louis walked back downstairs to the living room. Margaret had put out his slippers, so Louis sat down and took off his shoes and put them on.

"It feels good to be home," Louis said.

"Would you like a bite to eat?" Margaret said.

"Sure," Louis said.

They went into the dining room, and Louis ate some sandwiches, and drank some wine. Afterwards they went up to bed.

"Help me off with my coat, will you, Maggie?" Louis said.

She pulled off the coat, and saw the bandages on his arm.

"Another case of pneumonia?" she said.

And then she had a flash of intuition. She glanced from the bandages to the newspaper which she had brought upstairs and put on the dresser, intending to read in bed the long article that Bill O'Brien had written.

Louis wasn't a man to her anyhow. He was a sort of institution. He was so hard and impersonal that she never expected to get inside of him. But she knew just as well as if she had been told that the finding of the body and the death of the kidnapper had something to do with Louis' absence. It made her proud of Louis, but didn't lessen her fear of him in the slightest. He was so silent about what he did and what he thought. He never even bothered to tell her where he had been, what he planned to do, what he had done, or anything about himself, past, present or future.

Nothing could have illustrated the effect of Louis upon his intimates better than the fact that Margaret wouldn't have dared breathe her suspicion of the truth even to Louis. There was something admirable in that quality of silence in Louis, but there was something sinister in it, too. Margaret could wish

that Louis had been strong in better ways. But she was glad he was strong. And it felt good when Louis wrapped the mass of muscle and sinew that was his left arm around her a little later, and said:

"Look out for my right arm, Maggie; it's God damned sore."

Louis didn't make love: he made passion. And after he had made it he went to sleep and snored.

Margaret lay awake for a long time. She thought that if she could know everything that this strange husband of hers had been through in his life, she probably wouldn't want to live with him. Then she remembered that she hadn't taken any preventive measures.

"I might as well have another baby," Margaret thought, as she was going to sleep. "If Louis hadn't been born in Chinatown he might have been a big man."

The next night Louis came home early again, and got into his slippers. He ate some sandwiches, and drank some wine, and went to bed. Before he went to sleep, he said: "It feels good to have a home to come to, and to go to bed. It makes a guy feel good."

The next night, Louis took Margaret and Dan out for a ride. And two nights later, he took her to see a motion picture.

Louis didn't say anything that was on his mind to Margaret, but she began to hope that he had decided to turn over a new leaf and live the life of an ordinary business man, like their neighbors.

Margaret had become acquainted with several of the women who lived nearby. She had been brought up on pinochle and cribbage, and it didn't take her long to become a fair bridge player. She took lessons, and played for small sums, and was having the pleasantest time of her life.

Her new friends knew that her husband owned The Cellar

Door, and instead of looking down upon him for that, they respected him for running one of the best known and most popular eating and drinking places in New York.

Many of the husbands patronized The Cellar Door, and several of them owed Louis for checks. They suggested golf to Louis, but he called it pickey. He took some of them to the races on two or three occasions, and went to two or three drinking parties in neighbors' houses.

"But, Jesus! They serve bathtub gin in tumblers," he told Big Italy, one day when Big Italy dropped in at The Cellar Door to see him. "I can't stand that racket."

"You're getting settled down," Big Italy said. "You're sitting pretty. Your old man has got plenty of dough. I suppose those tenements are worth about $150,000 now."

"And he only paid $60,000 for 'em," Louis said.

"Fifty-nine thousand, five hundred," corrected Big Italy, who dabbled in real estate himself, "and he paid too much at that."

"The old place keeps your brothers," Big Italy added.

"Yeah," Louis said. "We haven't anything to worry about now except getting pinched, and we're careful about not selling anything to strangers."

"Getting all the stuff analyzed?" Big Italy inquired.

"Sure," Louis said. "I ain't dumb. But it's a funny thing that the only wood alcohol we got was in the cordials, and those are brought in from the other side. They must be slipping us poison over there. It's a hot one, ain't it?"

"They pinched Palermo the other day, and the Government chemists found wood alcohol in his cordials," Big Italy informed him. "And Palermo got his cordials off the ships. He made all the rest of it himself."

"Yeah," Louis said. "That's the way it goes."

"But you're sitting pretty now, Louis, with a wife and a kid, and money in the bank and a good legitimate business."

"The wife's goin' to have another kid, she tells me," Louis said.

"That's great," Big Italy said.

"How're things anyhow?" Louis asked.

"Well," Big Italy said, "I got a job I guess I'll put over tonight. It's this 'Big Nose' Eisenberg. He can't keep his nose clean—the son-of-a-bitch."

"Where is this guy?" Louis said.

"He's down at Coney Island," Big Italy told him. "I'll get him down there."

"I'll go along," Louis said.

"You'll go nowhere," Big Italy maintained. "You'll go home and put on the old slippers, and read the newspaper and listen to the radio and go to bed with your wife. You got responsibilities now. I wouldn't have you go."

"You're a liar and a bastard," Louis said. "You knew when you came up here that I was going to go with you."

"No, I didn't," Big Italy said. "You shouldn't go. You are all settled down and you got responsibilities."

"You wait till I've had enough drinks to get steamed up and then you tell me you're going after a guy," Louis said. "You know I was born wild and that I can't keep still."

"Well, you got to keep still now," Big Italy said. "You've been goin' home every night for a while now, and I ain't the guy to spoil that. You got responsibilities."

"Don't say that word to me again," Louis said. "You'll have me nutty. You know damned well I'm going with you, and that you came up here to get me to go with you."

"Have another drink and calm yourself," Big Italy said.

"There you go," Louis said. "You know damned well the

more booze I drink the more steamed up I get. Who's goin' to drive us down there—Joe Bergman?"

Big Italy regarded Louis out of those astonishing, hard light brown eyes, which never showed any traces of the pictures forming and re-forming in the brain behind them.

"No," he said. "Joe said he couldn't make it tonight. Jack Quinn is goin' to drive me."

This unusual circumstance of Joe Bergman not doing the driving didn't arouse Louis' conscious astonishment, as much as it might if he hadn't always taken for granted every act of Big Italy. A change in the custom of years, made by anyone except Big Italy, in such an important matter as a murder would have caused him to voice his surprise to himself, and to ask himself the reason. In this case the sensation of an unusual situation was smothered in the sedative bath of his trust in Big Italy.

"Jack can drive O.K.," Louis was saying when the telephone on the stand at his side rang. Louis picked up the French instrument, receiver and transmitter in one piece, and said: "Hello."

"It's me—Bill O'Brien," said the latter's voice over the wire, a curiously alcohol thickened, but pleasantly timbred voice. "I've got to see you right away, Louis. Will you wait for me there for half an hour, sure?"

"I can't make it tonight, I got a date."

"You got to cancel the date, then, Louis," Bill said insistently. "You got to."

"Aw can it, Bill," Louis replied pleasantly. "I'll see you tomorra, or next day. If you want any booze or anything, or any money or anything like that, the Kid'll take care of you."

"Now listen, Louis," Bill said, his husky baritone raising the merest trifle in pitch, and seriousness. "I never was so serious in my life. This is what they call on the stage a matter

of life and death. And it's just as serious as that. There couldn't be anything more important for me to see you about. For Christ's sake, don't stir out of there until I can get there. I don't want to talk over the telephone, and I don't want to talk now any longer than I have to. You've got to wait. I've got to see you. There's hell to pay."

Bill's voice, raised in earnestness, sprang out of the earpiece of the 'phone, in small, but clear air waves which filled the room.

"Hang up on him, why don't you?" Big Italy said. "A guy with a bun on, huh?"

"What is it, Bill?" Louis asked. "Tell me over the 'phone. What the hell are you afraid of? Make it fast now, Bill, or I'll hang up."

"I can't talk over the telephone," Bill said. "God damn it. Can't you understand? Wait there for me. You've got to."

"Aw, hang up on him," Big Italy urged. "He's crazy."

"I'll give you thirty seconds to tell me now," Louis said. "Then I'll hang up."

"Well, I've gotta take a chance, then," Bill said. "But if anybody hears me, we're in more trouble. They found an automobile jack in that sack."

Louis jammed the receiver hard against his ear, and took into his senses alone the remaining words:

"And they've traced it to the owner."

Louis and Big Italy were looking into one another's eyes at that moment. Neither pair, the light brown eyes of Big Italy or the dark brown ones of Louis, wavered a hair's breadth, nor showed any change in their hard, burnished surfaces.

But in the maelstrom of emotions back of the two hard, impassive faces twinkled the flying feet of Little Italy, and the tense atmosphere seemed again to quiver with the long drawn, suddenly hushed wail, neither ever had been able to forget.

A big clock on the wall ticked twice—TICK—TOCK. And Big Italy and Louis Beretti again had lived through their lives.

"I'll wait here, Bill," Louis said, and hung up the receiver.

"I can't go along with you, Italy," Louis said in his usual tones. "I got to see a guy on important business."

"O.K.," Big Italy said, just as casually, and reached for a drink without asking Louis to have one. And Louis poured himself a drink without asking Big Italy to have one. It was the first time either of them ever had done that too. They drank, watching each other.

Louis knew that so far as Big Italy and the mob was concerned he hadn't kept his nose clean. He didn't know how they had found out that he was responsible for the death of Guiseppi Vesalli, and the discovery of Bill Boonton's body, or if they had known of Joe Bergman's jack in the sack. But he knew that they knew enough.

On the curtain of his memory was a photographic flash of Joe Bergman looking at him when he had asked Joe Bergman to drive O'Brien up to Westchester. Joe Bergman had been suspicious then.

That picture hung for the hundredth part of a second and gave way to a mental image of Red McLaurin receiving his lethal dose of lead. Red hadn't kept his nose clean either.

But Louis understood perfectly that Big Italy knew, just as well as he knew, that Louis Beretti wasn't going to stand around and take a bellyful of lead from anyone.

Louis also understood that he couldn't explain anything. Explanations didn't count in his world. What happened was all that mattered. And what had happened was that he had butted into a situation that was none of his affair and, as a result of it, Joe Bergman would be arrested as the murderer; and if Joe Bergman squealed, it would involve the whole mob probably. Louis had little doubt the idea of the reward was

Big Italy's. There was nothing soft or sentimental about Big Italy.

It didn't take Louis a second to see the situation clearly.

"And what the hell did Italy want me to go down to Coney Island with him for?" Louis was thinking, when the telephone rang again. Still looking at Big Italy, Louis mechanically lifted the receiver, and said, "Hello." Margaret's voice said:

"Hello, Louis. This is Margaret."

There was a curious quality of suppression in her tone. But Louis wouldn't have needed that to have tightened every strained nerve in his body. She never had called him on the telephone before at his place of business.

"Hello," he said non-committally, squeezing the receiver into his ear.

"I just called you up," Margaret said, her words spacing themselves slowly, "to tell you that Dan is all right and I am going for a ride with the Atterburys, and we may not be home until late."

"O.K.," Louis said in the same non-committal tone. "Good-bye," and he hung up the receiver.

He knew someone was forcing Margaret to make that telephone call.

CHAPTER XXIII

Louis was seeing red. Dan! Dan, and then Margaret. But above all Dan. His flesh and his blood. A Beretti! Nothing mattered beside that.

He didn't know it, but he looked just as self-contained as ever when he got up from his chair, and stretched his big arms over his head. He didn't know it because his mind was a revolving wheel of lights, which was whirling with incredible speed around a central flame. The central flame was his purpose to get home.

No Little Italy was wailing when he swung his right fist to Big Italy's jaw, and knocked him senseless. There was no feeling at all in him, except the driving need of speed, when he pulled two big army automatics from Big Italy's pockets, and went through the door and down the stairs.

It was just after 1 o'clock in the morning. The street lights were dimmed by the bright October heavens. But Louis wasn't aware of that.

He jumped the steps, upsetting two late patrons who were just being admitted, and next he knew he was at the wheel of his roadster. In another instant he was going thirty miles in second; in another he was traveling forty in third. He went around into Seventh Avenue on two wheels.

He was at the entrance of the Hudson tubes in two minutes. At that hour the traffic ordinarily is light. It is not unusual for

patrons to drive between fifty and sixty miles on the long straight lanes under the Hudson River.

The unnoticed speedometer on Louis' car shot to fifty, to sixty, to seventy, to eighty. The rows of lights were one long stream of light.

He was unconscious of a warning gesture from a tunnel policeman. The tunnel policeman knew Louis Beretti. Louis Beretti wasn't seeing anybody or anything then except the road ahead, and Dan.

The speedometer was above eighty across the meadows. A motorcycle policeman took up the chase; was distanced, but kept on. Louis didn't even know about it.

The cold October moon, riding high in wind clouds that decorated rather than obscured the brilliant luminance of the heavens, furnished a wild, still light for the wild ride.

The demons of fear were screaming at Louis' back, and the cry of his own blood in peril was yanking him on. It was no mere mortal means of motion that was rocketing him home.

He was conscious of taking his first breath when he saw the familiar outline of Joe Bergman's get-a-way car in front of his house. He slid the last few rods with shut off motor, stopped with perfectly oiled four-wheel brakes, and went through the front door, an automatic in either hand.

CHAPTER XXIV

MARGARET had been lying in bed reading a newspaper, when instinct caused her to move the newspaper and look in a long mirror across the room. In its depths she saw the figure of a man just moving out of sight across the hall into Dan's room.

Instinctively, she gently lowered the paper, and picked up the telephone and whispered Louis' private number at The Cellar Door into the transmitter. She knew the number well. She often had wanted to call it. But somehow she never had mustered up the necessary courage.

Louis was just saying "Hello," when a man's voice in back of her, said:

"You tell him that the boy's all right and you're going out —and you make it natural, or you'll never see the boy again."

Margaret wanted to scream. She was sick with fear for Dan. There was Louis just at the other end of the telephone, and yet she couldn't tell him the danger. She hadn't any doubt the man meant what he said. So she told Louis she was going out with the Atterburys. She wondered if Louis thought she had gone crazy. She feared she had, or would. Louis sounded so cold and distant. When he put the receiver back on the hook the sound of it was like slamming shut in her ears the last gate of hope. She was at the brink of a bottomless black pit, and beginning to slip.

As a matter of fact, she almost fainted, and might have

fainted, if the rough hand grabbing the telephone from her hand hadn't bruised her.

The owner of the hand wore a mask, and he held a revolver.

"Now," he said, "you're going to tell me why this God damned husband of yours butted into that Boonton kidnapping case, and just what he did."

"I don't know," Margaret said, "Before God I don't know."

"You'd better know," the voice said. "You'd better know, or you'll never see your son again."

"Let her hear him sing a bit," the voice directed.

A muffled whimper of pain came from Dan.

"The servants are all chloroformed," the voice told her. "Your husband is going to take a long trip tonight—to Coney Island, and points beyond. Come on now."

"Oh God!" Margaret prayed. "Mother Mary help me."

"Nobody's goin' to help you," the voice said. "And I'm not goin' to give you all night to squawk, either."

A hand took rough hold of her wrist and twisted it sharply. She cried out involuntarily.

"Shut up," the voice commanded. "We're doing worse than that to the kid in the other room. We ain't goin' to hurt you; we're goin' to hurt him. Spill it."

"Oh God!" Margaret cried. "I don't know anything except that Louis was a pal of Billy Boonton's uncle in the war, and that when Billy's uncle was killed, he told Louis to do what a brother would do for his sister. And I felt sorry for the poor mother, and I kept after Louis, and he was gone for about a month, and then the newspapers printed stories that the boy was found and the kidnapper had been murdered."

"Oh, Louis was a little brother to the dame, was he?" the voice said. "Well you come on now and tell all about it. Come on."

"That's all I know. Oh, God help me. That's all I know," Margaret screamed. "It's all I know. Oh, don't hurt my baby."

"Let her hear the kid squawk a little again," the voice said. "Let her hear him squawk good."

Dan's cry of pain pierced Margaret like a dagger thrust.

"Oh please!" she shrieked. "Oh please! Oh God! Oh Mother Mary! Oh God!"

"Bring the kid in here, so she can see him," the voice directed.

A second masked man came in carrying Dan in one arm. He held one hand over Dan's mouth.

"The little bastard's fainted," the second Mask said.

"Well, bring him around," the first Mask said. "Throw some water on him; pour some hooch down his throat. Wake him up. Be quick about it."

The second Mask carried Dan's limp figure into the bath room off the bedroom, the door of which was ajar. He was bending over the bowl, letting water run over the child's head, when there was a sudden stamp of feet at the door, and Louis charged into the room.

Louis had an automatic in either hand, but he was so insane with rage that instead of trying to use them, he threw the one in his right hand at the first Mask, and then hit him viciously with his fist.

The first Mask went down, and Louis went on to the bath room. The second Mask lifted up Dan's body in front of himself as a shield, and fired three futile shots at Louis before Louis reached him.

Louis grunted horribly, the deep grunts of a strong man exerting the last ounce of his muscular and nervous force in a tremendous task. And yet in the blind orgasm of his rage Louis contrived to so hold his own body against the other's that Dan was prevented from falling.

Louis knew from wrestling and from jiu-jitsu and from other forms of personal combat, a large number of fatal holds, and practically no other holds. They were all fatal holds that he applied to Mask No. 2.

Mask No. 2 was Tommy Welch, and he died most unpleasantly and so fast that he had no time to consider his sins, which probably was more than he deserved.

A scream from Margaret caused Louis to turn with Dan in his arms, to see Mask No. 1, aiming a revolver at him.

Louis laid Dan down, and went over toward Mask No. 1, who, his disguise awry, now was revealed as Joe Bergman.

Joe, his eyes staring in horror, fired two shots at Louis. Louis' body jerked as the first heavy slug tore through him, and it jerked again, as the second one hit him with force enough to fell any mortal. But before Joe Bergman's fear-cramped forefinger could squeeze the trigger again, Louis had him.

His face distorted into a gargoyle grimace, Louis bent Joe Bergman's hand around until the revolver in it pointed into Joe's belly. Then Louis gradually increased the pressure on Joe Bergman's own trigger finger until the revolver exploded, sending a leaden plug through Joe's bowels.

Louis pressed again, and another bullet followed the first. He sent a third bullet into the body. And then he took the revolver in his own hand, and pressed it against Joe Bergman's ear, and blew out his brains.

The motorcycle policeman who had followed Louis' car ran into the room, just as the last shot was fired.

It was not a pretty sight that met his gaze.

"Kidnapping my kid," Louis said to the policeman, speaking with effort. "Will you look at him first?"

Dan began to cry.

"Get him and my wife out of here, quick," Louis said. "Get 'em out."

"And before you call a doctor," Louis continued, "and before you do anything, you call Spring OOOA, and see if Bill O'Brien is there. If he is, you tell him Joe Bergman is dead, and to come right over. If he isn't, you call Longacre AAOO, and tell Kid Quick to deliver that message when Bill O'Brien gets there."

"I gotta call Headquarters first, Mr. Beretti," the policeman said.

"You know me," Louis said. "And if you know what's good for yourself, you'll make my calls first."

CHAPTER XXV

When Bill O'Brien got to The Cellar Door he went right up the stairs to Louis' rooms, and went in. A bottle of whiskey was standing on the table. There was one glass partly filled with fluid, and another glass overturned.

"Louis," Bill called, and went to look in the bedroom.

A muffled voice, and a kicking sound took him to a closet. He opened the door, and discovered Big Italy.

"What's happened? Where's Louis? For Christ's sake, where's Louis?"

Bill was in a state of nerves.

Big Italy came out of the closet, as imperturbable as ever. There was a big lump on his left jaw, but he didn't even bother to feel it.

"Louis left in a hurry," Big Italy said.

At that moment the 'phone rang.

"Yes," Bill said. "This is Bill O'Brien talking."

"Jesus!" Bill said. "Jesus! What a story!"

Bill hung up the receiver, and said:

"Louis has killed Joe Bergman and another guy who he caught trying to kidnap his kid. And, Oh Jesus! The cops are after Bergman already for kidnapping the Boonton kid. I've gotta call my office. It's two o'clock in the morning, but we'll be going to press every five minutes from now on with this."

O'Brien picked up the telephone receiver.

"Have a drink?" Big Italy said.

"You bet," Bill O'Brien said. "You pour it for me, will you?"

"Hello! Hello!" he continued into the telephone. "Joe Bergman killed; 'nother guy killed too; Louis Beretti wounded; trying to kidnap Beretti's son over in Jersey. Take enough for a flash, and I'm on my way."

"Holy Moses!" Bill said to himself on the way down stairs, three at a time. "This cleans the slate. Joe Bergman gets credit for being the fall guy all around; and Louis'll be a hero after all."

Big Italy sat quietly at the table in Louis' suite after Bill had left, the breeze of his exit still stirring the rather musty silk curtains at the windows. He poured himself a big drink of whiskey, and felt in his pocket for one of his mammoth cigars.

He drew a gold clipper from his left waistcoat pocket, and deliberately clipped off the end of the cigar. After twirling it carefully between his lips to moisten the drawing end, he ignited it leisurely at the flame of a gold patent lighter which clung, along with the clipper, to the end of his gold watch chain. He took a deep draught of smoke into his lungs, and expelled two streams from his nostrils. Then he took a drink. And then he looked straight ahead, tapping with the left hand, on the little finger of which the big diamond flashed, on the table top.

Kid Quick found him sitting like that a few minutes later. The Kid, who had been growing fatter and fatter as manager of The Cellar Door, entered and sat down without saying anything to Big Italy. It was not usual to say anything to Big Italy when he was thinking.

Kid Quick was worried, and he showed it. He had known

about the Boonton kidnapping. The Kid hadn't liked the looks of things in the mob during the past few days. Joe Bergman and Tommy Welch had been acting queer. His own boss, Louis Beretti, had been away for a month, and Guiseppi Vesalli had been away for about the same time. And his boss came back, and Guiseppi remained away. And then the body of the kid that the crazy fool Vesalli had killed, had been found. It was a rotten mess.

Big Italy always worried Kid Quick. Big Italy shot a guy first, and never talked about it afterwards. He was a tough guy. But Kid Quick didn't think he was any tougher guy than Louis Beretti. In fact, Kid Quick's own idea was that he would rather have Louis Beretti around in a mess than Big Italy.

"Kid," Big Italy said finally. "We just heard over the telephone that Louis has killed Joe Bergman and Tommy Welch."

Bill O'Brien hadn't known it was Tommy Welch.

"Jesus!" Kid Quick said.

"The yellow bastards were trying to kidnap Louis' boy, Dan," Big Italy continued, looking at Kid Quick with bright, light brown eyes, which told nothing of the thoughts back of them, but always looked menacing. "And Louis killed 'em," Big Italy said.

Kid Quick didn't say anything. Sometimes it's healthier to keep one's mouth shut. That's one of the rules that Kid Quick had learned early in life. Big Italy took another long pull at his cigar, which now had an ash three inches long. Big Italy regarded the ash dispassionately. His nerves always had been good. He wouldn't have owned any other sort of nerves.

"Louis Beretti is a great guy," Big Italy went on. "He's one son-of-a-bitch that always does the right thing, and makes a good job of it. I'd give him the shirt off my back."

"Me too," Kid Quick said, relief in every line of his fat face.

It was so beautifully simple, Big Italy thought. Joe Berg-

man was out of the way. It was tough about Tommy Welch, but that couldn't be helped. Blame for everything could stop right where it was—on the two dead men. They couldn't talk.

Louis Beretti certainly was a great guy.

CHAPTER XXVI

THAT night's excitement was too much for Bill O'Brien's restraint. When he got back to The World office at 11 o'clock the next forenoon, he was putting one foot in front of the other, and smiling a sort of fatuous smile.

"I gotta great story," he said.

And they knew it. They had seen the symptoms before. And they knew just how to handle Bill. They sent him to a private office, with a cub reporter to see that he was supplied with everything he required—principally Scotch—and Bill wrote them a story to talk about as well as read.

Bill hadn't even considered keeping his word of silence to Louis Beretti after he heard of Joe Bergman's death. But, with the art of a master craftsman, he wrote his story so that Louis, having caught and killed the real kidnapper singlehanded, was seen as having been ahead of the police on the trail of Bergman.

And Louis did it all for Bill Pedersen, the pal who had died in France. And all the honor and the glory that Bill Pedersen certainly had never felt at his death, shone about the memory of him as painted by Bill O'Brien's fingers flying over the typewriter keys.

Bill had another highball, and Louis Beretti became a poor, hard working lad, who had fought and bled for Democracy

in the World War, and had come back to build up a big restaurant business; a business that he had jeopardized along with his life, and the safety of his beloved wife and son, to keep faith with his dying soldier pal. Margaret had told all she knew.

Bill had another highball, and the words that made Louis Beretti a figure of romance in the minds of the reading public forever after, poured off the flying letters in a faster stream.

Now, Bill leaned back in his chair and laughed. Now, he bent harder over the machine of iron and rubber and hit at it more fiercely, his breath coming shorter and shorter. He was Louis Beretti fighting for his life. Then he looked at the ceiling for a minute or two or three, and composed more slowly. He was writing a description then.

He had another highball, and tears gathered in his eyes. Bill was a mother whose son just had been killed by a kidnapper.

Poor Bill O'Brien, genius in the thrall of alcohol, sat there at his typewriter, and lived twenty lives in those few hours. He suffered gunshot wounds; he inflicted broken jaws; he died of strangulation; he suffered agonies of sorrow. He was limp when the last page was taken from the typewriter by the cub, and toted downstairs to a waiting editor. He was no good.

He looked with lackluster eyes at an empty bottle of Scotch, and put on his hat, and tottered out. He'd probably be fired for the God damned drivel he'd written anyhow. But it had looked like a great story when he began. Now, in a tremendous revulsion of feeling, it all looked like twaddle to him.

Louis Beretti was a tough guy, and no shining hero. But lots of heroes weren't so heroic, if you knew all the facts.

Bill turned in at the Printers' Club, because it was the nearest place, and bought a drink.

"The first today," he said, "with this hand."

When Louis Beretti awoke a week later, Margaret was afraid to tell him the whole story, that most mysteriously beautified and romanticized had been printed in the newspapers.

"How's Dan?" Louis asked.

"Fine," Margaret said. "He's having a nap."

"What time is it?" Louis demanded.

"It's 4 o'clock in the afternoon a week after you killed those two thugs," Margaret told him.

Margaret believed the newspapers and imagined there was a sort of halo around Louis' head. But she knew from past experience that he wouldn't be bothered by the fact that he had killed a couple of men.

"Get me a drink," Louis said. "I'm thirsty as hell."

And then he went to sleep again.

The Prosecuting Officers knew that Louis Beretti was no lily, and so did the police. But they were satisfied to let him be a hero.

District Attorney O'Toole, of New York County, said to District Attorney Swayne of Westchester County and County Prosecutor Wendell, of Hudson County, in Jersey, at a luncheon they had over the matter:

"No one could convict that thug Beretti of anything—even bootlegging now. Get in line and pat him on the back, and let it go at that."

Louis had a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Boonton and Louise Pedersen. He didn't want to see them, but he had to. Miss Pedersen wasn't at all soft, but she believed Bill O'Brien's words rather than her own knowledge. Bill Pedersen had become a sort of Sir Galahad, and Louis Beretti had picked up the Holy Grail where Bill had laid it down. Also Mrs. Boonton wanted to shake the hand that had brought death to the murderers of her son. She and her husband not only believed in capital punishment, they believed in boiling in oil.

Louise Pedersen stuck out her hand and said:

"You did a good job, Louis."

"The hell I did!" Louis responded.

"For Christ's sake," Louis said, after they had gone. "I'd like to get hold of Bill O'Brien. I could break his neck for writing all that drip, and your neck for telling him about Bill Pedersen. God damn it! I never told a woman anything about myself before in my life, and the first time I do I get in trouble; and I stick my nose in someone else's business, and I get it in the neck. For Christ's sake."

"But you're a hero now, Louis," Margaret said. "And we're all proud of you."

"I'm a hell of a hero," Louis Beretti said. "I'm a bootlegger —if I haven't been pinched while I been laid up here."

"Oh, everybody knows you can get something to drink with a meal in your restaurant," Margaret reassured him. "But everybody drinks."

"Shut up!" Louis said.